

Kumano Kodo

Pilgrimage to Powerspots



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Grand Masters of the Kyoto O.S.G.H. Lodge*

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Preface: The Long Walk

January 1st, 2018. Subzero temperatures in New York City. Even for a seasoned Vermonter such as myself, this was an unforgiving, emasculating cold. Those gelid jaws do not kiss loosely, nor hickey freely. They bite with indifference.

The first day of the year is a high holy day for the Order of St. George's Horse. On this day, the Order summons its available members and adoring affiliates for an extremely difficult ordeal: the Five Boroughs Walk. While not an official member, I should note I have been an early devotee to the Order, participating in most convivial, semi-ritualistic activities prescribed by the Order's grand fountainheads. In those nascent stages of growth, I was privileged to revel in the finest company. I had no idea the Order would, eventually, trample the overgrowth and trailblaze with a magnetic hubris.

In those initial days, the Order's crux was tomfoolery, horseplay, and hijinks. I belonged, even adjacently, though my recollection suggests I was also in attendance on numerous, inept moments. Laughter and the boisterous arts were in bloom. We were crowned as immortal tosspots.

I first became aware of the Five Boroughs Walk the previous year. In keeping with its custom, the Order inaugurated 2017 with a New Year's Day pilgrimage across all five boroughs of New York City. Throughout the long history of the Order, this holy walk had never been completed. Word went out that we would begin this particular attempt in the Bronx. Our coalescence of a collective hangover would gather. We started out as a fellowship of three, but six or seven other merry-makers joined the brigade in Queens. The plan was to cross the Bronx to Queens through Randall's Island, then Queens to Brooklyn (the easiest stretch), Brooklyn to Manhattan, ending on Staten Island (by ferry, of course). The mission was to complete this perambulation within one day, and stops along the way were encouraged and integral. Drinking and eating are quintessential to any band of revelers. Instead of following any itinerary, we drifted towards the horizon, assured our legs would deliver us to the end of our pilgrimage. We failed to complete this arbitrary and self-imposed quest, as before.

The following year, 2018, the frigid climate meant that the only fools daring enough to embark on a second attempt of the Five Boroughs Walk were myself and the co-author of the following book.

We succeeded this time. We set foot upon each borough and it was a long, arduous journey filled with the mustering of willpower, the satiation of thirst and hunger, and pollocked, intermittent laughter scattered in our steadfast wake. For what reason would anyone engage in such a frivolous and uncomfortable trek? Bragging rights? A sense of accomplishment? A thirst for meaning?

This introduction could easily become a narrative of our grueling, pointless expedition. But, that's not my purpose. What I can tell you is that only two of us accomplished this inane feat. We had moved through each of the five boroughs by nightfall, enjoying the warmth and relaxation afforded by the Staten Island Ferry. We ate and drank our way across windswept byways, regaling one another with, at times, pensive musings, while at others, asinine absurdities.

We walked with purpose. We earned bragging rights. We felt a sense of accomplishment. Was this a pilgrimage? A platonic soldering between two long-time friends? An adventure? A fool's errand?

It was fun, yet deeply uncomfortable. Why subject oneself to such harsh conditions? The company was good, for starters. Traveling, especially by foot, is more favorable when the companion is of the boon persuasion. And this has always been the case. The authors of *Kumano Kodo* are dear friends of mine, and that friendship blossomed along the canals of Amsterdam, was nourished on the sidewalks of Boston, fanned within the public houses of Brooklyn, and strengthened and solidified along the coastline of Ireland.

I bring up this personal account of the Five Boroughs Walk, which probably has no meaning or value to anyone other than those directly involved, because it invites questions which will prepare the mind to think about traveling with purpose, meandering with intent. What is a pilgrimage? In this introduction, I will be as reductionist as possible. *Kumano Kodo* is about taking a walk.

The serious stroller gets to know the lay of the land. Pavement to gravel to dirt to grass to forest floor to river bed to shoreline. Epidermal treadwork, terrestrial intimacy.

Walking. It is the favorite pastime of anyone with proclivities towards reflection, brooding, ruminating, thinking deeply and shallowly, and, most importantly, *receptivity*.

Going for a walk. Taking a stroll. Pilgrimage is nothing more. Yet, as will be revealed in greater depth throughout the following tome, such strolls are colored by the potential for a rebirth. A pilgrimage is elongated and strenuous. It requires physical and psychological demands which can be enervating, but ultimately rejuvenating.

And this is why there is an entire genre of vagabond, itinerant literature. You can call it autobiographical, but K. Hamsun, H. Miller, E. Hemingway, C. Bukowski - their stories were mainly about going for walks, observing the bustle around them as they drift along no particular course. Very simple, but very relatable. I suppose the chief difference between a Henry Miller and his esteemed Hilaire Belloc is one writer walks with anomie, the other with insurmountable purpose. Ultimately, each is moving forward because of their own imagination and bravado. Most meditative musings are the offspring of solitary walks, mostly within nature's hypnotic sway - though not exclusively. But breaking away from the wanderer's genre, we arrive at its close relative, the pilgrim's tale.

The term "pilgrim" is imbued with religious connotations. Traditionally, pilgrims are religious devotees. Yet, this is not the case in this book. The authors are a different breed of pilgrim. No less devout than religionists, they are guided by their revelations. They set sail so as to experience territories anew, with no preconceptions (if that's possible) and attach their own unique nomenclature, identifications, and explanations to their psychic longings. Wistful estuaries, where the tide meets the stream. Without a god to worship, what is their purpose? Perhaps they are seeking a new religion? Or perhaps they are simply personalizing experiential stimuli. Angels and demons are anthropomorphized internal flora.

Religion and art, I have often argued, are similar because they are ways of constructing sense from experience. The inspirational muse versus nominative deification. Naming ineffable afflatus is fascist and arrogant. Yet stories are created and religions are templated. Religion is birthed in opposition to artistic spontaneity. The artist doesn't feel the need to insist their interpretations are definitive, absolutist, or unalterable. The "prophet" wants everyone

to accept their explanation and mold their lifestyles in compliance.

Naming voices, attributing form to psychic phenomena, riding the currents of psychotropic turbulence – it is easier to reign in chaos if you open yourself up, but also accept its many forms: power animals, patron saints, spirit guides, allies, *kami*. Whatever we choose to call them, those phosphenic figures, they seem to be universal and recognizable to those who make themselves receptive. Those means may be psychedelics, meditation, self-flagellation, fasting - or prolonged walking.

For myself, I have always considered the long walk to have an artistically motivated impetus. I consider the goal to be making oneself susceptible to creative inspiration. Becoming a conduit. This approach is similar to psychedelicism, I suppose. Make yourself open, surrender, and roll with the experience.

Sacrality is negotiable. For Americans, the Statue of Liberty is a laughable pilgrimage destination. But sacred status is a claim, and when believed, it gives the journey meaning to focus on, and it's the imagination, concentrated will, which is the foundation of magical thinking and, therefore, illuminated sensation. Is the end of the railroad tracks in South Hero *sacred* because it was an integral part of my youth, a stage for fraternal and platonic connection through bonfire and commonplace sacraments? It is for me.

Most pilgrim literature does attempt to negotiate such sacrality. There are words which writers of a certain ilk are drawn to as if they are indisputable representations of truth (*Truth*, I should note, is my least favorite word as it is always in flux. Perhaps this is the very reason it is favored by so many).

Language can be just as attractive to humans as melody or color. Certain words excite us, they conjure up attractive imagery or wishes longing for fulfillment. The words we love, time and time again hint at an ineffable, initiated understanding of the world's innerworkings, regardless of their genuine veracity. *Mystery, mystical, revelation, sacred, holy, divinity, spiritual, numinous, esoteric, occult*. We love these words, and for understandable reasons. These words speak to the unseen dimensions of life. They are esoteric.

Pilgrimage is shrouded in mystery, which is why it is among humanity's oldest practices. The teachings from which it can stem belong to the archives of occult, elite knowledge. Everyone likes to belong to the exclusive club - though clubs no longer feel special when the guest list gets too long. This is when the esoteric becomes

mainstream and religious travel becomes tourism. In the pages that follow, the authors proclaim that “tourism itself is the child of pilgrimage.” In other words, religious travel has degenerated into an itinerary of hotels rooms, restaurants, and attractions. Every genuinely anomic poet knows traveling is synonymous with careening and undulating, being held hostage to their mad whims, driven by wanderlust, intuition, and curiosity. *It will find you, not vice versa.*

Here, in these introductory remarks, I would like to respond to one of the authors’ provocations. Should travel be engaged alone or with a close companion? Was Rousseau correct for celebrating the reveries of a *solitary* walker? Or is it preferable to share an experience collectively, participating in our biological unity, undergoing our own microcosmic realizations while walking the same paths as our compatriots? Alone or as a whole, true ego death can occur, followed by the desired rebirth – recognizing our place in this shared world. In this way tourism is pilgrimage...if that is the purpose, and perhaps it is. Yet, ego can also dissolve during the enduring of intense hardship, and that is why pilgrimage and touristpilgrimage both encourage intense walking and hiking.

Pilgrimage is alchemical. From the beat down, the mend becomes more obvious and pronounced. All symptoms of healing become felt more acutely, so that any return to normality feels heightened. Return to sobriety becomes ecstasy.

Immersion in unspoilt wilderness lends itself to ego-death and rebirth. Dirt, rock, moss, roots, underfoot. Oxygen overload from lush, prevalent foliage and greenery. Sounds unmechanized. Symphonic, improvised, yet patternized enough, following some biological predictability – an ecology of improvisation. Always perfect in its uniqueness. Of course, the walker’s mind must be prepared to some degree. The mind must be receptive, and acceptive, rather than resistant. The ego cannot flourish in wild nature, and that’s not only a good thing, it’s the best thing. The afforded restorative properties mean to dissipate the quotidian, miasmic fogs of our digitized world.

In *Kumano Kodo*, the authors celebrate Japanese animism with dignified reverence. They will also reveal their own romantic lust for mystical experience. They will furthermore reflect on preparations necessary for traveling a venerated path. The authors posit their own ideas persuasively. Crafting their own approach,

editing the playbook as they go, adjusting rules according to intuition, *prisca sapientia*, and trial-and-error.

Make no mistake, there is nothing wrong with the freestyle approach. In fact, by devising their own rules, their dreams became efficacious oracles. In the fluctuating balance of ludic exploration and reverence they create their own system of travel. Belief-systems begin as personalized manuals for understanding and navigating specific pathways in life, and in this way they emulate any creative expression. I used to dismiss all belief systems as inherently fallacious and artificial yet, as I age, I recognize this is, precisely, their appeal and value. They are not to be treated as absolute ends, but rather living, fluid scrolls, evidence of human life, proof of thought, which should be seen as a celebration of living. The Order of St. George's Horse is an example of such a creatively organized emanation. While it may have begun as a *coetus amicorum* reveling in the timeless spirit of horseplay, hijinks, and tomfoolery, it has, clearly, evolved into a more realized, actualized and deliberate alliance of seekers and thinkers. I'm glad to have been a part of its genesis, however loose or scattered my participation may have been. Perhaps, unbeknownst to me at the time, our incessant fits of laughter were our mellifluous means of naively attracting *kami* to our bravado-enstamped wake.

Reading *Kumano Kodo*, I'm filled with a deep wish that I had befriended the authors earlier in my life. If only they could have been with me during my solitary sojourns in Meteora or Samothraki; if only we could have stood together in unparalleled companionship at the Sanctuary of the Great Gods. As I mentioned, though, we do have a history of inspired walks, which forged strong bonds, establishing eternal friendship. Drunken boats swerving, captainless, carelessly and whimsically, landlocked yet astroplaning. We always knew the power of walking. Such simple gallavants were marked by boisterous confab, petty arguments, rowdy horseplay, drunken guffaws, and frivolous word-ejecta. Walks were fun, simply. This undisciplined, spontaneous practice slowly matured and became more defined in its purpose. Signs and omens reveal themselves freely, because we are looking for them.

Kumano Kodo is the documentation of sense-making. Writing can always be viewed as self-indulgent, Aeolian gusting, sure. But, I would now argue writing is the human way of unraveling those tangled and ragged balls of cerebral yarn, made taut and

voluminous from years of experience. No matter what, it reveals the author's unconscious imprints. Even the most pretentious, academically florid, or Joycean wordplay exposes a person's relationship to words and expression. There is a beauty, in my view, in any attempt to unveil the enshrouded occulta of the mind and inscribe the interpretation. It takes courage and, aside from its therapeutic effect on the author, it reminds the reader that sense-making is shared and human.

In my own life and experience, I have always preferred to travel by foot. I believe in inspiration. I believe in creative revelation. For me, walking long distances invites ideas. When one walks, one is untethered, while simultaneously bound to something bigger than ourselves.

What follows is a truly unique contribution to pilgrim literature. *Kumano Kodo* is a great work, written with diligence, reflective poignancy, academic discipline, and a contagious joy for wanderlust. The authors are my dear friends, and not only is it a distinguished honor to introduce their illustrious work, it is a pleasure to have been allowed into this "living mandala" where I became acquainted with the southern region of Kansai. I followed my friends, from afar, up along the Kii mountainside. They accomplished their trying trek, they absorbed the vivid phantasmagoria and chronicled their heightened perceptions.

What does one do when they finally return from the mountain? Reminisce, longingly, with wistful remembrance to keep that meaning alive? Teach? Initiate? Share? Or go back and retrace one's steps...barefoot?

by Jebson Interlandi
March 8th, 2022, Tunbridge, Vermont

Prologue

Pawasupotto (パワースポット) is the Japanese transliteration of “powerspot,” a term used by New Agers to describe a place suffused with supernatural forces. In what follows, readers shall find a speculative guide to the unseen world of *pawasupotto* lining the Kumano Kodo, Japan’s oldest pilgrimage route. Our attention is focused on the pilgrimage’s most popular trail, the Nakahechi route. Traversed for nearly a millennium, this well-worn passage stretches sixty-eight kilometers from the rural township of Kii-Tanabe to the waterfall at Kumano Nachi Taisha, within which the soul of a dragon is entombed.

Though this book is a travel guide, it does not provide recommendations for hotels, restaurants, or sightseeing locations along the Kumano Kodo. Such information is available elsewhere, and in any case, we have undoubtedly misremembered the names of our favorite dormitories, onsens, and tea houses. Moreover, plotting a trip according to other people’s experiences is unadventurous. It is this vicarious approach to traveling that defines the tourist. At best, the tourist is confined to either reaffirming what is already known, or disappointment – which is far more likely. Tourism is a system of alienation in which host and visitor are mutually objectified, and thereby estranged from genuine connection, from the opportunity to see each other fully. We propose a different system for trekking the Kumano Kodo.

At the core of pilgrimaging is the sacramentalization of everyday life. We consider Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and its sequel *The Dharma Bums* as exemplary records of this process, and the weird cartography of *pawasupotto*. Consider Kerouac’s reflections on peripatetic gastronomy: stale bread shared with boxcar hobos lifted the protagonist to the heights of sublimity, as though he had been given the body of Christ. Cheap hooch swigged on the roadside filled his heart with radiance, so that he became intoxicated with the perpetual forgiveness of Kannon, Bodhisattva of Mercy. To be sure, the journeys of Kerouac were not pilgrimages in a strict sense. This Zen-Catholic theologian was not following the footsteps of a great saint, or venturing towards the birthplace of a religious tradition.

Instead, Kerouac's merry band of holy hipsters journeyed within the margins of official culture towards a destination that was unknowable. They did not sojourn to a single place, but moved towards a revelatory plane of experience in which all places converge. Prioritizing new experience over received wisdom, their improvisational mode of travel – conducted for the sake of wisdom, omens, and miracles – resembles a *peregrinatio*. Like all words that undergo translation, *peregrinatio* contains multitudes – it is about both wandering and reaching a goal, depending on the context you choose to explore. In classical Latin, it refers to the act of wandering and traveling, with the particular connotation of foreignness – the *peregrinus* being one “not from around here.” In the European Middle Ages, though, it became the word used for what we might call “pilgrimage” – that is, the journey to a sacred goal. At its heart, however, *peregrinatio* signifies a departure from home: whether or not you are headed somewhere specific, the word signals that you have made the choice to go.

Peregrinatio is both aimless wandering and direct approaching, pilgrimage of the body and soul, the decision to set out. This, too, is what the Beatniks saw in the *peregrinatio*, and what inspired us to step outside the normative, contemporary framework of Kumano Kodo pilgrimage. We were especially eager to wander away from the narrative internalized by many modern pilgrims, in which hardships endured on the road culminate in a spiritual “coming of age.” Detached from our own private Bildungsroman, we stalked perpetual intensities and disastrous sensations.

Our itinerary on the Kumano Kodo was eccentric. Our destination was utopia, insofar as the etymology of the term (*u-topos*) signifies a location that does not exist – literally a “nowhere place.” In our view, pawasupotto are not simply locations, but qualities of being that cannot be captured, mapped, or domesticated as a tourist attraction. Our pilgrimage consisted of a widening of perception through risky experiments with irrational beliefs. Much more will be said of those irrational beliefs shortly; here, suffice it to say that our guide to the Kumano Kodo leads outside the mundane world.

The pilgrimage described in this record was not merely a journey. Instead, it was a series of realizations occasioned by un-learning mental habits and un-doing behavioral patterns. From our

perspective, pilgrims embrace the pain and suffering that tourists pay to avoid. Hardship is essential. Religious traveling is a process of Death and Rebirth. Actual pain represents the *dissolution* part of this binary. Joy represents rebirth, an awakening that animates the world and everything in it.

The road is a zone of liminality, a realm in which the structures of everyday life are dissolved. When responsibility to the family, clan, and nation are placed on hiatus, we are invited into a new *communitas*, as the anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner explained.¹ Following the polar star of high weirdness, the fellowship we forged while trekking the pilgrimage road included lovers, animals, plants, *kami* (lords or gods), stones, synchronicities, weather patterns, *yokai* (monsters), and *bakemono* (the fantastic). Intercoursing with the spirits that haunt the annals of Japanese folklore (as well as the eccentric pantheons of saints, buddhas, and demons we already carried within ourselves), we unbounded our imagination. As a result, this document moves between ethnobotany, mythography, art history, religious studies, critical fabulation, dreams, and eldritch horror. Our utopia, then, represented the sum of pawasupotto, wherein we tuned into the everyday dimension of the cosmic.

Introduction

Overview

The phrase *Kumano Kodo* can be translated as the “ancient road of Kumano” – but it is not exactly a trail. Instead, the pilgrimage encompasses a zone that stretches across the mountainous forests of the Kii peninsula on the southeast coast of Honshu, the Japanese archipelago’s largest island. This sylvan realm is populated by prehistoric settlements, hot springs, and medieval ruins, crisscrossed by hundreds of mountainous paths that flow into three grand shrines, collectively termed the Kumano Sanzan. Kumano is the region, and Sanzan translates to three (*san*) mountains (*zan*). Here, the term “mountains” does not correspond to a geographic feature, but rather the trio of mega-temple complexes that anchor the Kumano pilgrimage zone.

The first holy mountain is Kumano Hongu Taisha (“main shrine”), which houses the first children of the creator gods. Next is Hayatama Taisha in Shingu (“new shrine”), where the Japanese creator gods, Izanami and Izanagi, first arrived on Earth. Finally, there is the waterfall sanctuary of Kumano Nachi Taisha, perhaps the oldest of the shrines, which reputedly houses the soul of a dragon. Ancient in origin, these *pawasupotto* have attracted pilgrims since the paleolithic era, and a master deity, served by a retinue of minor gods, dwells in each grand shrine complex.

The Kodo, or “ancient route”, includes two other sacred sites that are the locus for their own religious traditions. An esoteric belief system of mountain asceticism, Shugendo is based on the holy mountain Yoshino-Omine. Not far away, Koya-san is the holy mountain of Tendai, a tantric school of Buddhism. Moreover, pantheons of immigrant gods are embedded along the pilgrim routes in the form of ensouled trees, magic wells, enchanted groves, furious river rapids, and primeval caves. As the historian David Moerman explains, “the mountains of Kumano contain a multiplicity of other worlds.”²

The legendary past is foremost amongst the other worlds mentioned by Moerman. The Kumano Kodo is Japan’s oldest pilgrimage; however, it is important to note that this claim of age is based not on the historical record, but on Japan’s national

mythology. According to the earliest written accounts of Japanese history, the *Kojiki* (712 CE) and *Nihon shoki* (720 CE), the gods first landed on Earth in the Kumano region, which subsequently became the backdrop for Japan's mythic history. Indeed, the mountainous landscape of the Kii Peninsula features so prominently in Japan's religio-political ideology of emperor worship that Moerman has described the Kumano region as "the cradle and sepulchre of the imperial cult."³

Among the most important episodes in the mythic history of Japan is the death of Izanami, the aforementioned creator goddess. The goddess was laid to rest in a cave located next to Hayatama shrine. Her lover, Izanagi, ventured into the cave in an attempt to save the creator goddess from the underworld, but returned empty-handed. However, his underworld adventure was not a total failure. After his trip to hell, Izanagi undertook a ritual bath and the filth that washed off took shape as the first Earth-born gods. This is the origin of Amaterasu, the most famous god in the Japanese pantheon and grand progenitor of the imperial dynasty of the Yamato clan.

Worshipped as the universal matron and sun goddess, Amaterasu gave birth to the first emperor, the Heavenly Grandson Jimmu. According to legend, the Japanese people are Jimmu's direct descendants, and therefore unique among all humans. The descendants of Amaterasu's younger brother, Susano-o, did not fare as well. For his love of mischief and distaste for the pompous rituals of the celestial court, Susano-o was cast out into the wilds of the Kii Peninsula, where he subsequently created his own kingdom of fever-swamps, pestilent grottos, and labyrinthine ruins. Allegedly, the nation of Japan emerged from a world-shattering battle in which Jimmu destroyed Susano-o and his army of ghouls, due in large part to a magical sword gifted to the Heavenly Grandson by a mysterious forest wizard. Hence, the land was cleansed of evil, and the originary line of humans prospered.

The religious meanings superimposed upon the Kumano region by the imperial cult were embellished further in the Heian period (795 CE to 1185 CE). During this era, the imperial hierarchy instituted the Buddhist doctrine of *gongen*, which merged the Shinto gods with the Buddhist deities who had migrated to Japan from the Korean peninsula. According to the theological framework of *gongen*, the Kumano gods were, in fact, local manifestations of far older and more powerful Buddhist deities. Thereby, the principal

deity of Pure Land Buddhism, Amida Buddha, became enshrined in Hongu Taisha; the radiantly blue Medicine Buddha, Yakushi Nyorai, took up residence at Hayatama Taisha; and the Thousand-Armed Buddha Avalokiteshwara, known as “Senju Kannon” in Japan, took up residence at Nachi alongside the dragon soul. Adding yet another layer of syncretism to the mythoscape of the Kumano mountains, each of the principal avatars of Kumano was merged with three additional kami, thereby raising the number of gods to twelve. Even more divinities joined this migration as the classical Heian period gave way to the era of feudalism under the Kamakura shogun (1185 – 1333), further overpopulating the sacred landscape of the Kii peninsula.

As we can see from even this brief overview of the Kumano’s sacrality, the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage is the product of endless narrative embellishment. The claim that it is the “oldest” pilgrimage in Japan, then, has more to do with the use of age and tradition as claims to authenticity and the resultant power of such claims. Enter UNESCO.

The astounding concentration of myth, folklore, and religion earned the Kumano Kodo entry into the UNESCO registry for World Cultural Heritage. In 2004, the United Nations christened this expansive pilgrimage zone “The Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Region.” Besides the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, the Kumano Kodo is the only pilgrimage trail honored as having “universal value for all of humanity” by UNESCO. This designation came at a price. The multiplicity of worlds and divinities that intermingled on the Kodo were forsaken in favor of a new master narrative designed to appeal to tourists.

One of the primary aims of this book is to interrogate and destabilize UNESCO’s master narrative. In essence, the tourist discourse exploits the pilgrimage as a natural resource, instead of honoring the zone as a living mandala of weird experiences. To be certain, the aim here is not to debunk the mystique that shrouds the Kumano Kodo. Instead, the converse is true. By dismantling the dominant tourist narrative, we shall re-center the pervasive chaos that animates this otherworldly passageway.

Hidden knowledge is earned, not learned. As such, recounting the fantastic tales, forbidden lore, and pilgrim superstitions is only of secondary importance in the present work. We are far more invested in uncovering how heterodox knowledge has been written

out of the tourist literature. Before proceeding, though, it is important that we make our own position on bakemono, and esoteric subjects in general, clear.

We neither accept nor reject any phenomena out of hand. We are empiricists, and this is a record of our own experiences walking the Kumano Kodo. As “suspicious agnostics,” our interpretations are informed by Egil Asprem’s argument regarding disenchantment: the retreat of supernatural phenomenon in the face of technological and scientific advancement is not an irrevocable *process*, but rather a *problem*. Since science cannot remove the terror of the

Gods, extraordinary experiences will forever bedevil the minds of us all. ⁴ In all frankness, there is an immodest amount of such experiences in what follows. Though some may dismiss our findings as the work of cranks, recall that cranks make the wheels of the world go round.

Chapter Summary

Kumano folklore defies coherence. The three-thousand-yearlong story of this region is a *Wunderkammer* of peasant revolts, imperial privilege, treasure hunting, magic battles, monster riots, cycles of deforestation and reforestation, and socioeconomic decline and boom. The superimposition of religious meanings, along with the multitudinous stratification of legends, myths, and folktales, is nothing short of stupefying. Suffering and exaltation echo throughout the incessant piping of fairy music that haunts the Kodo today.

This book is a kaleidoscopic look at our own pilgrimage along the Nakahechi route of the Kodo. Though we completed the actual journey in roughly a week, this time period does not accurately reflect the totality of our pilgrimage. It began many months before, and persisted well beyond our last step on the path. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, we were stranded in Kyoto for an additional nine weeks, where we found shelter with members of our pilgrim confraternity, the Order of St. George’s Horse (more on this later). This extended stay also allowed us the luxury of sifting through our many fractured, erotic, and uncanny experiences of the Kumano. Like a medieval palimpsest, these memories were overlaid with further explorations into the shrine-worlds of Kyoto and the famous Mt. Hiei. Our hosts, Grand Masters Raz & Kaz, to whom this book is

dedicated, thus also deserve special mention here for providing us with the comforts to live and work as “scholars-in-quarantine.” Due to the irregular circumstances created by the pandemic, we never fully integrated back into the ordinary world of illusion; let this account stand as a testament to our disinterest in ever doing so.

The first section of this book explores the preparations we made before embarking on the holy roads of the Kumano Sanzan. In order for the trails to reveal their secrets, the proper groundwork must be laid – after all, pilgrimage is an initiatic process. We discuss the techniques and equipment necessary for bypassing the tourist economy, and then examine the politics behind the World Heritage industry. Moreover, attention is paid to the genres of literature devoted to the Kumano Kodo. Scrutinizing guide books, historical monographs, and manga, we listened for the silences in the history of this pilgrimage. Our intention was to follow the trail of unnatural quietude into the otherworlds.

The second section of this book shifts attention to the phenomenology of the pilgrimage itself. Our subjective account is purposefully impractical. As mentioned, it offers no recommendations for accommodations, itineraries, or sight-seeing spots. Instead, we have attempted to territorialize the bizarre ecstasies and sublime horrors that bore down upon generations of pilgrims – and us. This story is grounded in the “material bodily principle,” Mikhail Bakhtin’s elaborate way of discussing the bare essentials of life: food, shelter, shitting, clothing, and sleep.⁵ The pilgrimage operation corresponds to the totalizing transfiguration of these essentials, as they materialize in thought-patterns, dreams, emotions, bowels, lung capacity, and hungers.

Conclusion

For thousands of years, pilgrimage has been depicted as the passage between two worlds. Victor Turner’s landmark article “The Center Out There” defined the pilgrim’s topology as balanced on the axis of the mundane world and the enchanted realm of the road. These two domains are organized by different social structures. The mundane world, which so blithely passes for “reality,” is grey, lonely, and oppressive. The foundational premise of modern life is inescapability, the ethos of *No Exit* by which Jean-Paul Sartre defined existentialism. Conversely, being a pilgrim means losing

oneself in fellow-feeling not only with other people, but with mother sky, brother moon, and father ocean. Reflecting the telepathic socialism of nature itself, this mode of collectivity encompasses the entire universe. The road is regarded as a sacred space in which individuals can surrender their conditioned routines and become more of who they really are. Commerce with the spirit implies possession in a literal sense. This is the raw material out of which forgotten lore, folk miracles, forest sorcery, and fertility rites are forged.

Designed to destroy all who traverse it, the Kodo is a doomsday device made of stone, dirt, and moss.

Walking with Monsters

Pilgrimage Confraternity

More than a decade ago, the two authors of this book founded the Order of St. George's Horse (O.S.G.H.). We have chronicled the origins (mythical and otherwise) of this chivalric confraternity elsewhere, so here, we need only mention that our Order is devoted to honoring the spirit guides – whether animal, vegetable, or mineral – that travelers meet while on the road.

Pilgrimage is its own mystical religion. The anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner clarified this point by asserting, “if mysticism is an interior pilgrimage, then pilgrimage is exteriorized mysticism.”⁶ While our fellowship is associated with the cult of Saint James, it is not beholden to any specific worldview. Each member of our confraternity is responsible for devising their own religious cosmology. That said, our members tend to share the belief that Saint James is an emblem for the transformative knowledge acquired by pilgrims. Known in centuries past as Iacobus, Iago, Jacob, Jacques, Jacome, and Jaime, and today as Santiago, San Diego, and São Tiago, this saint is an avatar of peregrinatio. This type of travel is defined by the processual dissolution of boundaries between the self and nature whereupon the oneness of being is revealed as an experiential fact. So we hail Saint James as a shapeshifter, and proclaim pilgrimage as our sacrament.

For the O.S.G.H., the success of the pilgrimage is determined by the intensity of preparation conducted beforehand. Yet, the course of study recommended here entails more than the simple acquisition of new information. Our aim is *un-doing* the self. Though rarely mentioned in modern literature, the pilgrimage is not a voyage of discovery, but a processual destruction of the habits that shape our lives. We may feel the sentience of the universe, bathe in its mysteries of love, and decode its cryptic signatures, but only after abandoning all the readymade truths of civilization.

Across time and space, pilgrims are commanded to undergo a series of purification rites before heading out into the trail. There are detailed records, for example, accounting for the complex series of ablutions, conducted over the course of several weeks in total isolation, that Japanese emperors underwent before they set out on

the Kumano Kodo. ⁷ As part of their purification rituals, they remained abstinent, refrained from eating certain foods, and devoted many hours to continuous prayer. ⁸ Likewise, the O.S.G.H. employs a regime of psychological deconditioning so that the mind is free to reimprint the paradigmatic structure of a new supernatural order. We have defined our regime against the modern school of pilgrimage, typified in Paulo Coelho's *The Pilgrimage*, which insists no intensive preparation or purification is necessary.

Perhaps illumination needs no preparation – and it may be sufficient for some pilgrims to simply interpret everything that happens on the Kodo as a direct message from the kami, and to train their attention so as to recognize how the gods shine through every conversation, meal, drink, prayer, and moment of solitude. Again, this is not our approach. What follows is an abbreviated account of the preparatory regime we followed, and the insights this process facilitated, before our departure for the Kumano Kodo.

Potlatch

The Order's sacramental approach to travel includes an elaborate culture of ornate documentation. The most significant document is the pilgrim's passport, a tradition that we absorbed from the cult of St. James.

In order to complete the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, pilgrims must present themselves to the Oficina del Peregrino in the city of Santiago, the holy resting place of St. James. Here, pilgrims on the Way of Santiago submit their pilgrim passport to the city's papal bureaucracy. The document is then taken and scrutinized for any irregularities.

The passport itself can be ordered free of charge from any number of pilgrim confraternities, or purchased for a nominal fee in any of the Catholic churches in Santiago. Folding out accordion-style, the document is composed of eight pages, each of which has four squares. These squares must be filled with a stamp, dispensed by shrine-keepers, barmen, and parish priests stationed along the path.

If the pilgrim has received all the necessary stamps, the front-office Catholic bureaucrat in the Oficina del Peregrino presents the pilgrim with the *compostela*, a certificate affirming that the bearer has received a partial absolution of their sins. Though technically an exercise in religious papershuffling, the certification of the pilgrim passport is the capstone of the St. James cultic initiation. For, like so many apparently mundane things, the passport itself is an immensely powerful piece of material culture that can break the thrall of the secular world.

The Kumano Sanzan has followed the papal bureaucracy by likewise issuing its own pilgrims' passports. These can be retrieved from the tourist office in Kii-Tanabe, the jumping off point for the Nakahechi route of the Kumano Kodo (as profiled in the next section). Alongside these official documents, members of our society fashion their own passports.

Wading into the rushing current that flows down the Kumano Kodo, we held our own banner aloft. The road rewards such self-ownership. To be sure, we encountered people on our pilgrimage who did not regard such unusual passports as legitimate credentials

– but to us, this is all the more evidence that they are essential. Forged passports allow the bearer to become any number of identities (religious weirdo, artistic nutcase, alien visitor), according to the shifting demands of the cosmic road.

It is also O.S.G.H. custom to carry an additional passport, to be exchanged with another pilgrim. In the decade since our confraternity was founded, we have exchanged passports with numerous other fellowships, a custom we adopted from the self-styled “lunatic fringe” of modern American religion. Much has been written on the Imperial Charters of Freemasons, Discordian Pope cards, as well as Moorish Science passports, so here I shall limit myself to mentioning that, on the metaphysical level, mystical passports play an essential role in migrating off this plane of being. In sum, we forged our own papers as a concrete expression of our desire to go into the *beyond*.

On both the Camino and Kodo, a portion of pilgrims take the implications of the passport to its logical extent. Having died and been reborn on the road, they take this new document of identity as justification for their refusal to return to any previous mundane life. Instead, these converts migrate out of the secular world, so as to resettle as bartenders, innkeepers, or travel guides on the cosmic highway. These royal roads have taken their fair share of devotees, too. Many of these pilgrims-turned-cultists can be found staffing the dormitories lining pilgrimage routes. Such hardcore pilgrimsturned-cultists tend to be creatures of eminently high spirits, good humor, and generosity. Furthermore, they are among the best repositories of trail knowledge that is illicit, hidden, or otherwise rejected.

It is also worth mentioning another class of devotees who are far more numerous. These part-time pilgrims have not dropped out of their mundane lives completely, but rather confine themselves to a sort of dual citizenship in which they only work to make enough money to pilgrimage once again. This class of devotees can be identified by their mantra, which they repeat over and over to all who will listen: *see you next time*.

These holy roadwarriors have taught us that the basis for a successful pilgrimage is reciprocity. Tourists want an “authentic” experience, but they are thwarted at every turn, failing to realize that a genuine connection is always dialogical. Gratitude is not enough – even supposing that one has mastered the extremely delicate conventions that govern courtesy from country to country.

Relying as much as possible on trade, exchange, and giving offers a direct way around the alienation of commodity exchange, and the mutual objectification of tourism. But watch out: the inhabitants of the spirit world have their own angelic economy of exchange – and they may demand things of you, as well.

The guardians of the other-world drive hard bargains – but so do we. So, in preparation for setting out, we pack our bags with gifts to flatter the trail spirits, tokens for fellow travelers, and goodwill mementos for the hosts who take us in along the way. Taking our lead from ancient myths, it is our pride, as a chivalric order, to share certain rare seeds that bear forbidden fruit to our well-met *confrères*.

Having discussed our relationships with others, let us now turn to the way we treat our own selves. Members of our Order rarely make video documents or photobooks. Instead, our brothers and sisters compose magic diaries. The difference between a mundane account and a magical record deserves to be explained. In order to make a living record of one's journey, it is necessary to leave all facts and data behind, and only record uncivilized fantasies, irrational conclusions, and deviant sensations. Paint grotesque portraits, cheer on the apocalypse, or administer your private kingdom of heaven: let loose totally.

Command yourself to write anything you damn well please. Ink your deepest desires into being. Everything that could never be said in public belongs in this diary. To be sure, such records are not meant for mass consumption; rather, these texts are wild zones where the imagination is free to illuminate its boldest fancies, frenzies, fantasies, and fanaticism. As such, this book of secret perversions is an ideal place to confide the dreams that visit the pilgrim nightly.

Let there be no doubt: the pilgrimage continues at an even faster pace after the pilgrim has fallen to sleep. The cosmic pantheon speaks most clearly and directly in dreams. A full account of these visitations could not be contained in a planet full of libraries, insofar as they are as vast as the supersensorial realm of the imagination. Nonetheless, dive deep into this invisible landscape. All of this to say: be the author of your very own dangerous book. The composition of these texts is one of our confraternity's oldest practices – and indeed, the text you are perusing now is one such experimental book.

Members of the O.S.G.H. are obliged to author a personal account of their journeys for the enrichment, edification, and entertainment of the confraternity at large. Circulated privately, these texts are also used to attract the attention of potential patrons from the aristocratic classes, conforming to the time-honored tradition of Kumano pilgrim texts. Of course, not all O.S.G.H. pilgrimage accounts are discursive. Two members of our society use garments as the medium upon which they document their travels. While on their journeys, they spend a portion of their evenings stitching, sewing, and embroidering symbolic emblems onto both sides of their sweatshirts, which they have specially made for each pilgrimage. Each hieroglyph and cryptogram acts as a souvenir for a moment in which they trespassed outside of time during their sojourn. Considering the joy they derive from this practice, we whole-heartedly recommend it to all pilgrims. That said, authoring pilgrim diaries and embroidering garments are only two of the road projects pursued by our confraternity. Passion projects lead travelers off the beaten path, and that is always a shortcut to adventure.

There is one final document that members of our Order prepare before setting out on the road. On the eve of this departure, our confrères compose a last will and testament. This documentary custom can be traced to ancient eras, when pilgrims customarily did not anticipate returning home from their travels. It was common knowledge that the road, wherever it may lead, was beset by wild animals, brigands, and mercenaries. Even if pilgrims managed to escape from those who would do them harm, they still had to contend with the ever-present threat of famine, earthquakes, hurricanes, plagues, pestilence, poisoned wells, locust swarms, and every manner of inclement weather. Some pilgrimages even have death as their natural end, like those pilgrims who travel to Varanasi in India to die in the holiest possible way; even the Kumano has its own history of death-seeking pilgrims, as we will see. Though the possibility of dying on the trail has been diminished considerably, members of the O.S.G.H. follow in the footsteps of their premodern ancestors by likewise composing final testaments.

The value of these documents is threefold. First, submitting this document (sealed and addressed, please!) to the Order is yet another means of securing the bond of our fraternal kinship.

Second, authoring a will forces us to take stock of our possessions and relational priorities. Recall that the will includes both disbursement of material possessions and burial instructions. As palliative caregivers make clear, a detailed set of burial instructions serves as a ritual map for the family members and friends, who would otherwise be denied closure. By completing the instruction, they become coparticipants in the individual's transition from life to death. Finally, creating a last will and testament holds symbolic value for orderers. By signing this document, we declare ourselves dead to the world – at least temporarily. We leave behind our lives and renounce our material attachments as soon as we depart on the holy road.

We shall conclude this section with a note on packing. The Order uses a standard packing list for pilgrimages. Two black cotton shirts, a pair of denim pants, a poncho, a hat, and five pairs of socks. As for seasonal accessories, members outfit themselves with a wool sweater for winter and spring journeys. Technology is limited to one disposable camera, which is valuable not simply for capturing memories but also because it sharpens the eye. Since cameras such as these are limited to twenty-four exposures, each photograph becomes instilled with a clear intention, which reflects a heightened sense of discernment. For protection against the elements, this device is kept in a plastic bag along with passports, seeds, and money. As a consequence, being caught in the rain means wet clothes – nothing more. The medicine kit should include a toothbrush (to be shared with traveling companions), soap bar, comb, epinephrine, bandages, disinfectant, and shoelaces. Also, confer with local contacts about vital medicines which they cannot purchase when they go abroad, such as the adhesive hemostatic Yunnan Baiyao. Members of the confraternity are also issued personalized O.S.G.H. calling cards listing their name, degrees, and expertise. Distributing one such card can work better than a bribe, in some situations. Finally, all of this gear should be packed in the pilgrim's rucksack, and tested prior to departure through a range of ambulatory exercises in wilderness terrain.

The Saturation Job

Another means of our preparation involved what the poet Charles Olson termed a “saturation job.” This endeavor entails an obsessive drive to learn everything there is about any given topic. In practical terms, it means regulating one’s intellectual diet so as to prioritize research into the pilgrimage in one’s free time.

In accordance with this approach, we consulted all of the available literature on the Kumano region in the months leading up to the voyage, and stretched our inter-library loan beyond its limits. We roamed through this body of learning in search of interstitial points through which we could pass through the proverbial torii gates of gnosis. This section offers an overview of our bibliographic journey.

The Western-language literature available on the Kumano Kodo is somewhat sparse, both in academic texts and more popular accounts of the trail. Given that the Kodo was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2004, we were puzzled by this information deficiency. Nevertheless, we dove headlong into what we could find, and, like the heroes of H.P. Lovecraft’s Gothic tales, obsessed over the penumbral otherside of knowing what cannot be said. But let us take you into this sordid undergrowth via the same path that brought us there, by beginning at the beginning, amid the unthreatening atmosphere of library stacks.

There are three bodies of literature that shed light on the Kumano Kodo. The scholarly literature is the most beneficial reference corpus, as it provides numerous openings into the pilgrimage as both fact and fiction, mythic and lived. That said, there is relatively little academic work on the Kumano Kodo written in Western languages. The only full length scholarly study we were able to locate was *Localizing Paradise: Kumano Pilgrimage and the Religious Landscape of Premodern Japan* by David Max Moerman. Published as part of Harvard’s East Asia Monographs series, the book had an extremely limited publication run, and is currently unavailable for purchase.

The inaccessibility of Moerman’s relatively new text is unfortunate, as this book sketches a vivid portrait of the Kumano Kodo in the centuries before electricity snuffed its atavistic

enchantments. Furthermore, this account contains a great deal of useful information for present-day pilgrims. For example, Moerman directed our attention to the longstanding tradition of Kumano Kodo pilgrimage songs. A twelfth-century anthology of popular verse, the *Ryōjin-hisho*, included hymns for every occasion, offering us a framework for composing our own Kumano Kodo songbook. Thanks to Yung-Hee Kim's beautiful translation, *Songs to Make the Dust Dance*, we memorized a handful of bawdy songs meant to be sung at the table, and humorous verses for bathing, taking a shit, and preparing for bed, in addition to musical magical verses for restoring courage when facing the edge of dangerous cliffs, dispelling bouts of gloom, and inviting the breeze under the scorching sun. We adopted some of these songs and adapted others to suit our interests. These were added to our confraternity's collective pilgrim songbook, which contains original compositions as well as the tunes sung by the adventuring fellowship in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.

Moerman's scholarship also inspired us to appropriate another tradition, wherein pilgrims selected a number of auspicious mountain vistas to act as sites for poetry recitations. These bardic contests, termed *ute awge*, were popularized in the Middle Ages by the retired emperors who co-opted the Kumano Kodo. These aging hegemony exploited the prestige of Japan's oldest pilgrimage to stage a theatrical political ritual in which they supposedly ascended beyond political authority and into the realm of cosmic rulership, as "Dharma Kings." More will be said about these emperor pilgrims later on; here, I should mention that while our forebears permitted preconceived poems to be performed, we did not. Instead, we opened our minds up to the kami, whom we invited to speak through us. Great poems demonstrated a mind emptied of clutter, and were duly applauded, whereas less inspiring poems indicated hunger or thirst. To be sure, though, even mediocre poetry is worthy of respect, on account of its diagnostic and revelatory qualities. There was much feasting at these bardic *pawasupotto*.

Due to the Kumano Kodo's UNESCO status, the genre of guidebooks is considerably more voluminous than the academic literature. However, this body of literature is always already compromised, in both form and content. Our assessment of this genre rests on two questions: who reads guidebooks? And, more importantly, what are they looking for? For some, the purchase of

the guidebook is a statement of intent, an act signaling that, at some point, this trip will occur. What is found within its pages is of lesser importance. It is a weak-willed promise for the armchair explorer. There is yet another possibility, wherein the book is purchased, read, and plans are made accordingly. Pages are dog-eared, bookings are made, and packing lists are closely followed. Perhaps pages are even torn out, and carried abroad.

If the trip abroad never materializes, the guidebook can grow to become a monstrous talisman. Speaking silently from the shelves, it mocks the sedentary, would-be pilgrim. The guidebook can likewise transform itself into a dark, allconsuming power, a throbbing testimony to places-I-havebeen, tourist-experiences-I-have-had.

The forecast is no less grim for the overly bookish. Building a trip in the mind results in precisely that: a prefab experience, a list of things to do and goals to meet. In short, reliance on a guidebook has the chilling potential to transform your pilgrimage into just another day at work, reaching quotas and maximizing productivity. You can only eat at the *best* places, sleep in the *most authentic* guesthouses, walk the *most efficient* routes. There is no room for play in any of its forms – and remember, play is an ambivalent quality, both fun and fear, failure and experiment.

Yet guidebooks persist, have persisted, as part of the important body of ephemera of human culture. Indeed, this genre was created by pilgrims, whose travelogues were crucial for navigating a world where travel outside of one's hometown was the exception, not the norm. A famous early entrant to this genre was the pilgrim's guide written by Egeria, who made a pilgrimage from Europe (possibly Spain) to the Holy Land in the 380s CE. The document survives today in incomplete form, but tells the story of one wealthy woman's journey to see the embryonic churches and rituals of the Eastern Christian world. Notably, her accounts focus on the things she finds strange and new: different ways of performing the liturgy, for example, and new Latin expressions (evidence of an emerging vernacular) she heard on the road. It was, then, not a list of places to see and things to eat, but more of a report, designed to be shared with her community of nuns back home, to fortify their faith and entertain their hearts. Egeria's guide finds a parallel in the *Tosa Nikki*, the Kumano Kodo guide written in 935 CE. Authored by an anonymous woman, this diary offers readers a series of

impressionistic portraits of the Kumano pilgrimage that evoke the spirits dwelling in these mountains, rather than the mountains themselves.

The pilgrim's guidebook continued to develop over the course of the centuries. The tradition was especially rich along Spain's Camino de Santiago de Compostela, which produced its own sub-tradition of medieval guides. Here, recommendations and warnings were made alongside lists of churches, shrines, and holy trees and rivers – travelers were advised which parts of the trail were difficult, which innkeepers were unscrupulous, and even where to bathe (in a town called Lavacolla, a name that can be translated as “genital wash,” as it was customary to wash one's private parts before entering the holy city of Santiago. We can imagine countless pilgrims dropping trousers and lifting skirts to cleanse their pricks and cunts, a riot, one hopes, of pranks and titillations, made all the sweeter by the knowledge that soon they would arrive in the bosom of St. James).

Medieval guidebooks exist for the Kumano Kodo, too, and like those from the Camino, they are only distant cousins of the “guidebook” as we know it today. One such account, the *Ionushi*, dates to the late tenth or eleventh century. Structured according to the stops its author, the Buddhist priest Zoki, made along the trail, it is also a poetic meditation on bugs he swatted away, deer he encountered, and the shape of the night sky. Later aristocratic pilgrims provide similar landviewing records, and demonstrate an obsession with divinatory geomancy. Imperial Taoist magi produced pages upon pages of explanations and justifications of when to depart, when to arrive, and how long to stay at the shrine once one arrived, all calculated according to inscrutable alchemicoastrological processes. The transcription of this knowledge into writing is only the transformation of a more ancient, powerful, and useful form of info-transfer: the conversation, the drunken sharing, the festal conspiracy. Pilgrims learn most by speaking to other pilgrims, by noting signs in the forest, by learning, in short, how to be out in the world, away from the comforts of home.

Medieval pilgrims on the Kodo knew this well, thanks to another form of guide: the mandara of the Bikuni nuns. These maps, known as sankei mandara (the transliterated Japanese form of the word “mandala”), are didactic paintings depicting the stations of

the Kumano Kodo. Though they proliferated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they are little known today. The Bikuni nuns, too, have all but disappeared from view, though once they were a common sight along the routes leading to the Kodo. In a 1691 account by a German physician, they are described as “young and delicate,” singing to travelers “songs with gentle tunes.”⁹

These songs, it seems, were the narrativization of the mandara they carried with them. For most non-Japanese, the term “mandala” probably conjures up not densely-populated landscapes, but the geometric, colorful compositions of Tibetan Buddhist *thangkas*. These Tibetan mandalas are ordered images in bold hues, peopled by deities seated on equally regulated lotuses, uniform down to the number and shape of their petals. However, the images of *sankei mandara* are closer to true guidebooks: maps of the gods, to the gods, for the gods.

Following years of civil wars, a new middle class emerged in Japan in the sixteenth century. These *nouveaux riches* became the source of income for enterprising nuns and monks who missed the donations of the now-impooverished aristocracy. Though the middle class merchants had the wealth, and sometimes the time, to donate money and undergo pilgrimage, they were also not well-versed in the ins and outs of the customs and legends of their homeland. This is where the *sankei mandara* came in, serving as didactic propaganda, touted by proto-carnival barkers who promised healing, happiness, and wealth. These mandara were as much theater as they were visual art.

We can imagine, then, an enterprising Bikuni nun arriving in a small hamlet, bearing this folded paper and a long, thin rod on her back; or, perhaps, she walked through this village looking for a favorable maple from which to hang it. Then, the crowds would have begun to form before this image, drawn in both by the new arrival and its bright colors and humorous and intriguing anecdotes. Surveying the crowd, our nun could have made a quick assessment – many women, today; and so she focuses on the location of a shrine that brings easy childbirth or luck in love. Other times she might see merchants gathering at the crowd's fringes – and these were just the sort of men who might have money to give, *and* time to take a pilgrimage – so she would speak of the rare items one could buy at Nachi Falls, or the wealth enjoyed by shopkeepers who had visited its roaring waters. Some in the crowd may have asked questions, too – who are those deities in the river, there? – or been in the mood to hear rapturous descriptions of the beauty of the shrine's sakura in the spring.

The presentation complete, our nun could have imparted more information about the shrine and its customs, making promises that all this and more awaited those who undertook the Kumano Kodo themselves. And for those who did, these mandara served another purpose. Though these images were not accurate in the sense of providing precise scale or distance, they did present the kinds of places and experiences one would find at the shrine, juxtaposing these concrete facts with more narrative information, as well, like types of festivals, general impressions of the landscape, and local customs and legends. In other words, they were pragmatic as well as dramatic, presenting a view of the pilgrim's cosmos as he or she might find it – or hope to feel it.

The modern-day guidebook, by contrast, has lost much of this experiential feeling, the storytelling and myth-making of the nuns replaced by dry accounts of who, what, where, and when. It is too much book, and not enough guide, a fixed document (even if updated yearly), filled with knowledge that is repeated solely by virtue of already being there.

Still, with their lists of hotels and inns, restaurants and shops, temples and shrines, the guidebooks of today do have a concrete purpose – and, what is more, the myriad Kumano Kodos that they sketch in their pages are revealing in their own right. And so, our

“saturation” by necessity included a survey of the small library of modern, English, Kumano Kodo guidebooks.

The earliest English language guidebook was self-published by Dr. Hans Beumer, a business guru and amateur travel author. Totalling 337 pages, Beumer’s *Kumano Kodo* is by far the longest entry in this genre of pilgrim literature. His text is somewhat remarkable, considering that the author pieced it all together from tourist office brochures, the trail’s instructional signage, and the Tanabe City Kumano Tourist Bureau website – not to mention his own experiences on the trail. Moreover, it is worth keeping in mind that, at the time when he was writing, most of the information was only available in Japanese, as the trail’s official English language guidebook would not be published until three years later.

The focus of Beumer’s book is neither history nor cultural heritage. Rather, his primary concern is notating the distance between waymarkers, the variations in elevation encountered each day, and the changes in “underfoot” conditions as the pilgrimage route snakes its way to the three Grand Shrines. His reporting is sober, attentive, and descriptive in a manner that divulges the author’s professional career as a chief auditing executive. Personally, I found his managerial tone and corporate mentality perversely refreshing, and was especially delighted to find that the author evaluated the pilgrimage as if he were auditing a business. As is customary in business writing, Beumer’s *Kumano Kodo* opens with a bulletpoint summary entitled “20 Tips for the Pilgrim,” and concludes with “10 Calls to Action for Local Tourist offices.” (According to our research, the Tanabe City Kumano Tourist Bureau seems to have followed his shrewd plan for optimizing the user experience!)

By bringing his passion and expertise for corporate auditing to the Kodo, the author created an account that is singularly distinctive in its utility. Imagine if others specialists did the same: a pilgrim survivalist booklet mapping the optimal locations for underground bunkers; ethnobotanists and herbalists sketching the Kodo’s psychoactive flora and fauna; science fiction paranoids scouring the tree line for invisible booby-traps set by lizard people from inside the hollow earth; the diaries of occult treasure hunters... we should be so lucky.

Representative of most pilgrims today, Beumer appears to have had extremely limited expectations for encountering the mysterious

or sublime on the Kumano Kodo. Spoken like a true Swiss Protestant, Beumer summarizes his pilgrim theology, stating, "Kumano Kodo is about suffering, making the pilgrim clear his sins. The suffering is caused by the hardship experienced during the trekking through the difficult mountainous region." He continues, "Upon arrival at the three Grand Shrines, the pilgrims would revitalize themselves and all their sins would have been cleared." ¹⁰ His pilgrim theology jives with our own, as we define the tourist as the pilgrim who avoids pain. We differ from Beumer, however, on the question of supernaturalism. In his account, the dissolution of karmic transgressions or "sins" is a matter of personal suffering. For us, the religious economy of pilgrimage entails personal agony *and* the gratuitous grace of the kami. Death and rebirth – a process that unfolds on the level of the individual and the world, simultaneously.

One year after Beumer self-published his guide, Kat Davis authored *Japan's Kumano Kodo Pilgrimage: The UNESCO World Heritage Trek*. To Davis' credit, no other work goes into such depth about the practical particularities involved in this pilgrimage. With sections devoted, for example, to using Japanese pay phones and purchasing travel insurance, the attention to detail here is gratuitous. Though the author should be praised for her meticulousness, it stands to reason that her text preconditions the reader to only see, hear, and feel what appears in the guide. Thus, there is no room for revelation, meaningful coincidences, or mystical signs. Guides such as these insulate visitors from anything lowly, dirty, or depraved, which is the very texture of history itself. Of course, such a partial rendering of the landscape is rarely the intention of the author, but rather an imperative within corporate guidebooks.

There should be little doubt that Davis was constrained by the expectations of her publisher, Cicerone. This publishing house caters not to pilgrims, but to the upscale hikers who actually purchase their glossy guidebooks. The guidebook market is extremely competitive, and this is all the more true for recently-minted UNESCO heritage sites, like the Kodo. Here, the key to publishing a best-selling guide is not insight, but info-density. The result, as Japan's Kumano Kodo Pilgrimage illustrates, is an impressive compendium of dry facts presented in generic prose.

Considering the genre conventions imposed upon her, it would

be unfair to claim that there is too little of Davis' own experiences in the book. Nonetheless, every few pages I daydreamed about the guidebook's unconscious side, the organic realm of lewd ethnographic notations, unsystematic field sketching, and poetic frenzies. In these moments, I walked alongside Davis (who tragically died a few weeks prior to our departure) in her daily triumphs, miseries, and ennui. Awakening from my reverie, though, I found only fragments of this underworld of the imagination scattered throughout her book.

The Kumano Kodo Official Guide, published by the Tanabe City Kumano Tourist Bureau, appeared on the market in 2019. It offers readers a variety of maps, updated bus schedules, a digest of the local wildlife, sketches of important sites, historical anecdotes, and practical instructions on how to worship at shrines. It contains much of the same information as Davis' text, and has a nearly identical page count. However, the work has distinguishing features. The organization, content, and style of Cicerone guidebooks is standardized, which tends to homogenize the location under review according to a prefabricated mold. This is not the case with the official guidebook. It is the authoritative statement of the UNESCO master narrative superimposed onto the Kumano Kodo. It is so official, in fact, that the cover does not even include the name of its author, which is unfortunate, as Brad Towle deserves credit, not only for producing such an authoritative text on what was presumably a limited budget, but for shooting the magnificently vivid photos that appear on every page of the book. The high-quality, full-color photos of the trail's temples, icons, flora and fauna give the text far more "readability" than the Cicerone and Beumer guides.

The guidebooks discussed up to this point are of limited use to our own ideas of pilgrimage – but the same cannot be said of the videography of Mike Rhodes. We first encountered the subtle charm of Rhodes in an online video tutorial extolling the virtues – and explaining the ritual protocol – of bathing in the Tsuboyu onsen in Yunomine (our own land of the Lotus Eaters, as we will discuss in the next section). Also sponsored by the Tanabe City Kumano Tourist Bureau, Rhodes' videos offer a concise set of instructions regarding every notable feature of the Kumano Kodo. His videos are, moreover, enjoyable to watch; his passion for the pilgrimage is unalloyed by the play-acting that seems inherent in such

promotional material.

We found ourselves, unexpectedly, face-to-face with Rhodes on the first day of our pilgrimage. Our paths crossed at a Michi-no-eki rest stop about 13 kilometers from the Nakahechi trailhead, at Takajiri-oji. It had been a particularly draining day – as we will explore later – so to see him, our celebrity pilgrim of the modern Kumano Kodo, was surreal. He remarked how peculiar it was to have strangers recognize him, but the creatures that rule over the trail have peculiar senses of humor, and we could sense them giggling from behind the vending machine and huddled over a bowl of soba served by the proprietress inside. The course of our conversation crossed over pleasantries and the unseasonably hot weather before arriving at the spiritual value of suffering while walking the Kodo. In his view, all were welcome on the trail – *Nature hikes for the nature lovers; undue discomfort for pilgrims!* The sun was falling rapidly, and there were many hours of trekking before our next stop. We pushed on, our spirits lifted by our rendezvous with the Kodo's unofficial trailmaster.

There is an additional body of literature related to the Kumano Kodo: the international traveler video blog. The uniformity of this genre is astonishing. A common narrative runs like a red thread through these video documents: each is composed by well-intentioned vacationers who stumble their way through a series of low-stakes social dramas before coming to the trite realization that the universe is love. This painfully oblivious narrative rightly emphasizes the intensity of the social bonding created by the pilgrimage; however, their clichés about the power of travel betray the fact that, for the authors, the Kodo was little more than a rare bout of nomadism that ultimately fortified the inhibitory psychological structures the journey was intended to dissolve. Here, the total process of the pilgrimage is reduced to the banalities of upper-middle class international travel.

Considering its ubiquitous appeal for pilgrims today, the technological fetishism at work in these video travelogues is worth dissecting. To start, the ineffable grandeur of life can only be internalized through the faculty of the imagination. The greatness of one's imagination is reflected in the appetite for the sublime, and the sense of wonder upon encountering it. The authors behind this corpus of video travelogues, like all techno-philic travelers, rely on recording technology to do the work that they themselves feel

incapable of doing – that is, of grasping the beauty, mystery, and horror that stands before them in the fleeting moment of the present. To be sure, in the face of the sublime, we all find ourselves small, but again we must invoke the value of discomfort.

It is not comfortable to encounter the sublime. By encountering the terror of the gods, we find new footing, by which we move out and through to awe. The problem with the camera, then, is that it can function as a place to hide, to avoid the painful power of the sublime. Better to allow our own tremendous inadequacy to work its jagged way through our imaginations and daydreams. The potential for revelation is held at bay by the eager acceptance of spectatorship – and herein lies the tragedy of technological fetishism.

A final entry into the literature on the Kumano comes in the form of an expensive, limited-run photography book sponsored by the camera company Leica. Neither guidebook nor, exactly, art book, it is composed of about twenty largeformat, glossy photographs taken on the Nakahechi route of the Kumano. The only substantial text is the creators' mission statement that offers only dull platitudes about the beauty of nature. The photographs themselves are more nuanced, making use of the camera's ability to render the world not as it looks, but as it feels; misty cypress trees evoke the lonely trail, washed-out landscapes suggest heat, and tight shots of hands intimate connection. But even these tropes strike an alien note, as if completing a list of "must-haves" – nature, humans, animals. The world is held at arm's length, mediated, quite literally, by mirrors and lenses until what we see printed is a falsehood masquerading as the real. These carefully produced images can stick in the mind, rising unbidden as one peers out across a mountaintop, layering pictures like coats of paint. The mountain becomes an accumulation of all the mountains one has ever seen, regardless of medium or (relative) reality. We are indexical in mind and body – but pilgrimage is, happily, like a bath of acid, dissolving our accretions so we may re-form.

Having consulted these works, we found ourselves wondering what had been left out of the story of the Kumano Kodo. For all of their deep research, Moerman, Beumer, and Davis seldom mentioned the uncanny dimension of the pilgrimage, though it haunted their texts. Closing our eyes after days saturated in research, we dreamt of a darker tale of spiritual Armageddon,

ecological apocalypse, corporate privatization, and bad faith prefectural politics. Our visions coalesced into suspicions, which led to hypotheses. The end result was a bulging file-folder labeled “The UNESCO Caper.” Here is our report.

The UNESCO Caper

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural organization – or UNESCO – designated the Kumano Kodo as a “Universal World Heritage Site” in 2004. The story behind this designation is a parade of bitter feuds, religious prophecy, and shady deals that played out on a global scale. It is unfortunate that the story of the UNESCO Caper has been effaced from the official tourist narrative, as this historical drama offers the key to the modern Kumano mythology.

Let us start with the facts. Though it had been an extremely popular pilgrimage route since at least the eighth century, the Kumano Kodo fell into disuse in the Showa period. This especially dark epoch of Japanese history opened with the great Kanto earthquake of 1926 and ended in 1989 with the death of Emperor Hirohito. It was the modern age of Japanese imperialism, in which the sons and daughters of Amaterasu, Japan’s ancestral deity, staked their claim to a global empire with a series of blood-soaked military campaigns. This period of adventurist imperialism includes the capture and occupation of Korea (1905-1945), Manchuria (1931-1945), Vietnam (1940-1945), and the Philippines (1942-1945).

The Nippon juggernaut performed remarkable feats of courage and brutality during both its imperialist crusades and the World Wars. These conflicts devoured the lives of Japan’s youth, as well as the country’s vast reserve of lumber, coal, and mineral deposits. The primeval forests of the remote Kii peninsula were foremost among the areas that were leveled to feed the fires of industrialization – and so, the enchanted landscape of the Kumano region was converted into natural resources. (Filmgoers may recognize the crises brought on by this transformation as the plot of Hayao Miyazaki’s *Princess Mononoke*).

Thereby, the gods of the primeval woodlands of Kumano were sacrificed on the altar of nationalism. In retrospect, the death of the forest, along with its ancient guardians, was merely the birth pains of modernity.

The power of the shrines dotting the Kii peninsula declined propitiously after 1945. The nuclear blast sites of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki have a place in history textbooks worldwide, but these cities were not the only metropolises that had to be rebuilt in the aftermath of the Pacific War. Aerial firebombing by the American military reduced both major metropolises like Tokyo and Osaka, as well as smaller cities, such as Maebashi, Nishinomiya, Saga, Mito, Nagaoka, Yawata, and Fukuyama, to cinders. By the end of the war, the country's entire infrastructure had to be rebuilt from the village-level up. Subsequently, the Kumano region was sold off to the domestic logging companies that drove the postwar reconstruction effort.

The economic miracle of postwar Japan was fueled by the plundering of the Kumano region. Partnered with the forestry department, corporate industrialists seeded the area with cryptomeria, cedar, and cypress trees. These cash-crops proved detrimental to the Kii watershed, as they choked out the native beech and lucidophyllous forests. The resultant destruction led one resource engineer to exclaim, "Kumano is not a forest, it's a plantation." Moreover, as a result of mismanagement, the plantations of the Kii peninsula had to be repeatedly clear-cut, replanted, and treated with chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and insecticides.

This destruction of sacred groves in the Kumano region represented a dramatic shift away from the policy of previous emperors. After each snowfall, storm, and natural disaster, medieval rulers dispatched a small army of priests to carefully document any damage sustained by their god-trees, which protected the kingdom and brought prosperity to the people. There arose a vast array of folk magic related to felling trees, centered on the Buddhist rite of *kuyo* that ritually neutralized any arboreal spirit who sought revenge.¹¹ Fast forward to the 1980s when the government gave logging firms, construction syndicates, and hydro-engineers permission to raze this region with total impunity. The trashing of the Kumano continued unabated for years, as industrialists from around the country dumped their scrap metal in Kumano, thereby transforming the region into a fetid wasteland of toxic refuse. The most iconic image of this ruination was "tatami mountain," a trash pile thirty-meters high made out of approximately fifty thousand decomposing tatami mats.¹²

The destruction of the forest, pollution of the soil, and dumping of industrial garbage amounted to a metaconflagration of

the Kumano kami. The ancient gods slowly rotted in festering pools of sun-bleached plastic containers and oily sludge. Until the final years of the twentieth century, the Kumano Kodo remained a wasteland. But unbeknownst to most, mutant godlings were emerging from the slime, and their whisperings eventually reached a small band of eccentric religionists.

The ruination of the Kumano outraged the monks of Shugendo, a religious path whose name has been translated as “the way of power through discipline and trials.” The monks of this naturalist folk cult, termed *yamabushi* (those who sleep in the mountains), cultivate magical powers by undergoing intensive training in the mountains of the Kii peninsula. This shamanic band of wild-eyed healers, clerics, and prophets was outlawed by the Japanese government in 1872 because their rustic conjurations were seen as out of step with the spirit of modernization sweeping through the country. Consequently, these outlaw wizards retreated to Koya-san, their impassable mountain fortress. Though their numbers dwindled due to intermittent persecution, a minority of tenacious *yamabushi* persisted in their rituals throughout the protracted destruction of the Kumano during the Showa period.

In the early 1990s, the forest hermits of Shugendo received a prophecy that set their minds aflame. The point of Shugendo is to intercourse with the local deities residing in trees, stones, pools, and the natural landscape. A commonplace practice among them is trance possession, and it is here, in the spirit-link between the Kumano gods and the *yamabushi*, that the revitalization of the Kodo began.

Industrial pestilence had roused the kami of the Kumano from their sleep. Awakened, they formed pacts with the dwindling bands of Shugendo monks, who set to work clearing the region of waste. The rural holymen’s efforts to clear scrap metal, drain ooze-pools, and remove accumulated tons of garbage aroused the sympathy of the neighboring populace, who soon enlisted in their ecological crusade. Their progress was swift, and before long it caught the attention of local corporate bosses, who recognized the revitalization effort as an opportunity ripe for exploitation.

By the mid-1990s, prefectural politicians had brokered deals with the monks of Shugendo and their allies. Together, they composed redevelopment plans designed to appeal to the bureaucratic administrators of Japan’s cultural heritage. For the

next few years, the revitalization of the Kumano project was folded in the Japanese heritage industry, a multibillion dollar conglomeration of business interests that commodify the natural landscape as an antidote to the chronic sense of alienation occasioned by industrialization's rush. The redevelopment program would have ended there, were it not for Koichiro Matsuura, a Japanese diplomat who saw the revitalization of the Kumano as his chance to seize control of the UN's culture bureau. Here, a short aside about the culture of corruption within UNESCO is instructive.

The director of UNESCO is elected by a secret ballot cast by an executive committee. The position rotates every six years, and is extremely desirable for reasons that will be made apparent shortly. The position of UNESCO Director opened in 1999, after the former director, Spain's Federico Mayor Zaragoza, vacated the office under a cloud of ignobility.

The extreme degree of corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement within UNESCO has been a public secret for some decades. However, the level of graft reached new heights during the years Zaragoza led the organization. Under his stewardship, UNESCO granted Spain thirty-six separate World Heritage designations, ostensibly making it the global leader in humanity's cultural patrimony.

All pretense of propriety was dropped in the elections for the UNESCO directorship in 1999, according to reports filed by *The Guardian* newspaper. The two primary contenders were Japan's ambassador to Paris, Koichiro Matsuura, and the Saudi Arabian ambassador to London, Ghazi Algosaibi. Matsuura emerged as the early frontrunner after successfully negotiating for the directorship election to take place on his home turf, Paris. Despite this advantage, the decision was forced into a second round of secret voting when Zaragoza refused to cast his ballot.

In order to assume the office, candidates must have a total of thirty votes. The outgoing Director controls twelve of these votes. For his patronage, Zaragoza demanded a payoff of five million euros. Though these payoffs were common practice within the institutional history of UNESCO, the Spanish diplomat was demanding almost twice as much money as his predecessor. Even so, the money spent was worth it, because it is the director who determines the projects that receive UNESCO's significant largess (the biennial budget is approximately 544 million dollars). Though its official mission statement claims preservation of humanity's cultural heritage as its aim, UNESCO is also a system for prioritizing landmarks within the global consumer market.¹³

Matsuura ultimately paid the bribe and thereby assumed leadership of this international funding agency in 1999. The stage was set for the Kumano Kodo to become the next UNESCO franchise.

For Matsuura and his cronies, the first order of business was to rewrite the recent history of the Kumano Kodo. The totalizing destruction of the Showa period had to be buried underneath an elaborate intellectual edifice. Matsuura's commission selected the period from the tenth through the twelfth centuries as the focal point for the Kumano Kodo master narrative. A key feature of this narrative was the invention of a new word, created as a means of

exploiting the booming interest in walking tours among Japanese people. Drawing from the term *kaido* (walking on ancient road), the Kumano Kodo tourist literature introduced the word *kodo* to the reading public. Though this word roughly translates to “ancient road,” it refers almost exclusively to the Kumano Kodo trails.¹⁴

Matsuura’s decision to use medieval history as the basis for the Kumano Kodo master narrative was inspired by his predecessor. Federico Mayor Zaragoza wrote the book, so to speak, on transforming a historical pilgrimage trail into a lucrative UNESCO franchise.

Before Matsuura took power, UNESCO recognized the Camino de Santiago de Compostela as the only pilgrimage with universal human value. This Catholic pilgrimage snakes its way across the Galician coast of northern Spain to the relics of St. James the Apostle, located in the city of Santiago.

Like the Kumano Kodo, the Camino de Santiago de Compostela fell into ruin as a result of the country’s modernization and economic collapse following the Second World War. Consequently, the Zaragoza regime channeled millions of euros into projects promoting the Camino, and reframed the Middle Ages as the focal point of the pilgrimage narrative in the process. His plan was a remarkable success, as the Camino is now one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world.

Ushering in an era of enormous prosperity into Northern Spain, the UNESCO designation led to the creation of a massive tourist infrastructure. Pilgrims need accommodation, food, alcohol, supplies, medical treatment, guides, and infocenters, all of which the local populace readily supplied. And the wealth has only increased, as the number of pilgrims along the Camino has increased each year since the Camino received its UNESCO designation. From 1994 to 2004, the annual number of pilgrims jumped from approximately 300 to 180,000. Another decade hence, the number doubled to roughly 360,000. (Though conservative estimates projected the number of *peregrinos* to reach 500,000 by 2021, the global pandemic of 2020 will surely be a confounding factor.)

The economic windfall in Galicia cast a spell over Matsuura, who envisioned the Kumano Kodo as a similarly lucrative UNESCO franchise. In their projections, Matsuura’s commission predicted a net gain of thirty-seven billion yen following the revitalization

project. Despite the similarities between these two pilgrimages, though, transforming the Kumano Kodo into a UNESCO franchise came with its own unique challenges.

The monks of Shugendo have traditionally forbidden women from participating in their rituals, citing archaic doctrines linking menstruation to ritual impurity. Moreover, these mountain clerics prohibit women from entering their sacred fortress, Omimesanji, located on Mt. Koya. Such gender discrimination, of course, posed a serious problem for Matsuura, and specifically his grand scheme to register the Kii Peninsula as a UNESCO heritage site. If the region had “universal human value,” it could not remain off-limits to more than half of the world’s population. The ruling committee debated this ugly contradiction for most of 2004, and finally concluded in favor of Shugendo. Matsuura insisted that the discriminatory practices of Shugendo were an integral part of Japan’s precious religious heritage, and, somewhat paradoxically, then proceeded with his plans to transform this allegedly sacred region into extremely lucrative profit-generating apparatus.

Cementing a partnership between UNESCO franchises, Matsuura brokered an alliance between the priestly hierarchy at the Grand Kumano Shrine and the Papal bureaucracy that administers the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. The product of this arrangement was the Dual Pilgrim program, which offers pilgrims who walk both the Camino de Santiago and the Kumano Kodo a sacred credential blessed by priests from both the Vatican and the Association of Shinto Shrines (or *Jinja Honcho*). In order to receive this complimentary document, pilgrims must simply present evidence that they have walked the Way of St. James and the Kumano trail to the Hongu Tourist office, a brutalist conglomeration of glass and steel that has been installed just outside the Grand Kumano Shrine of Hongu Taisha. The bulky incongruity of this building within its surroundings is an appropriate externalization of the commercial ideology UNESCO franchises promote under the guise of “heritage.”

The Darkness over Hongu

There are two general types of pilgrimage, according to Victor and Edith Turner. The “prototypical” pilgrimage retraces the life and career of a religious founder, as exemplified by the hajj, wherein Muslims recreate the prophet Mohammad’s journey to Mecca. ¹⁵ The Kumano Kodo resembles the other general type, which the Turners classified as the “archaic” pilgrimage. The topology of “archaic” pilgrimages are not defined by the strictures of orthodoxy; rather, these holy roads are built atop layers of folklore, legends, and defunct religious traditions, which have become syncretized with official religious traditions. Archaic pilgrimages are submerged in godsigns that deviate from all that is *orthodox* (*orthobeing* Greek for “straight”).

The archaic pilgrimage is the sum total of the beliefs layered across millennia. In order to excavate the social worlds buried beneath the Kumano Kodo, we turned to Gerald Figal’s *Monsters and Civilization*. This study analyzed how local ways of knowing, and especially the dense ecological niche of regional *bakemono* (monsters, goblins, or spirits), were demoted from being recognized as part of local religious cults to the status of mere folklore during the Meiji period (1868-1912) of Japan modernization. Figal argues that this process of delegitimization, in which the beliefs of local cults were denigrated as rustic superstition, had an unintended side-effect. The folk beliefs that were delegitimized ultimately grew more powerful over time, as in the process of psychological repression. Accordingly, the fantastic periodically bursts forth in the popular imagination of today. These ruptures leave fault lines, which we traced in the history of the Kumano Kodo.

In all its complexity, history is messy and murky, and constantly being remade – unlike heritage, which presents the past as a coherent narrative of linear progress. Heritage is order. History is chaos. The tension between history and heritage was expertly dramatized in “Visitor from the Darkness.” This weird tale appeared as part of Morohoshi Daijirou’s manga *Yokai Hunter: The Field Notes of Hieda Reijirou*, which features the supernatural adventures of Reijirou, a once-renowned archaeologist booted out of the academy for his investment in ancient aliens, lost civilizations, and

cryptozoology.

“Visitor from the Darkness” opens with the town elders of Otori, a fictional mountain village reminiscent of Hongu, discussing how they can save their community from impending economic collapse. Ultimately, the elders decide to abandon agriculture for the heritage industry, and stake their hopes on reviving an ancient *matsuri* (religious festival) in order to attract tourists to their village. Resurrecting the matsuri’s religious rites, last performed by their greatgrandparents, proves too much of a hassle for the village planners, so they hire an unscrupulous priest to perform a new ceremony designed to titillate tourists. The action begins with the arrival of the manga’s titular character, Reijirou, who represents the voice of history over and against the heritage industry.

Disembarking from the train in Otori, Reijirou is outraged to discover that the Otori officials have also relocated the village’s torii gate. This ancestral door to the world of the kami was uprooted from its original placement in the adjacent forest, and reconstructed next to the train station. The archaeologist’s horror is compounded when he realizes that the matsuri’s traditional ceremony has been replaced with a chintzy modern invention. Reijirou warns that their transgressions will invite unspeakable horrors, and sure enough, instead of inviting divine blessings, the bogus ceremony summons a gigantic, murderous demon. The beast emerges from the relocated torii gate and proceeds to devour dozens of townspeople and tourists while destroying the village.

The evil god is eventually banished after Reijirou locates the town’s oldest villager, who is able to perform the original, archaic ceremony. Surveying the death and destruction that has befallen Otori, Reijirou explains that the torii gate originally faced the direction of the god’s heavenly abode (East), and therefore opened onto the realm of fertility. After its relocation, though, the torii gate faced the direction of death (North), which allowed the demogod to enter into this world. The moral of the story is clear: exploiting religious history for profit only provokes the anger of the gods, who refused to be confined within neat, tourist-ready packages.

The story “Visitor from the Darkness” is eerily prescient with respect to the urban redevelopment of Hongu in 2000. Dating back to the ninth century, this upland municipality is home to the central shrine of the Kumano Kodo, Hongu Taisha, which was relocated from its original location after massive regional flooding. As part of

the reconstruction process, Hongu city officials sought to draw in more tourists by relocating the town's torii gate. Unlike in Daijirou's story, the prefectural officials of Hongu did not reposition the torii gate towards the land of the dead. Their vision was much bigger. In the hopes of garnering tourist money, the Hongu redevelopment committee constructed the largest torii gate in Japan. This gimmick was also meant to foster civic pride amongst the city's inhabitants; however, it did little to assuage the citizens' long standing resentments.

Instilling hometown pride in the citizens of Hongu-cho was no easy task. Like the fictional town of Otori, the villages surrounding present-day Hongu had suffered a steady economic decline throughout the Showa era. The decline became so dramatic that villagers were forced to abandon their familial settlements, some of which dated back millennia, and resettle in an artificial township. This is the origin of Hongu-cho, which was created in 1954.

There was a pronounced lack of enthusiasm for the world's largest torii gate among the citizens of Hongu-cho. The recent past was still a painful memory. So as to take attention away from the destruction of their villages and the traditional life-ways they embodied, city officials launched a number of civic pride projects that emphasized the town's prehistoric heritage. These projects included the production of tourist publications, hosting academic conferences, and yes, re-staging ancient religious festivals.¹⁶ The Hongu heritage campaign's focus on a shared prehistoric past was not entirely bogus, as stone implements dating back to the Jomon period (c. 14,000-300 BCE) were excavated in surrounding forests in the 1990s. This evidence suggests that this part of the Kumano Kodo was indeed a prehistoric settlement, and the resting place of numerous, prehistorical kami cults.

This is not to say that we expect angry kami to come pouring out of the giant concrete torii gate outside of Hongu anytime soon (though what a kaiju film that would be!). Still, like all good speculative fiction, Daijirou's manga points to a hidden truth about the present: heritage is not history, and truth is a wild animal that we would do best not to underestimate.

Shinto and its Discontents

According to the UNESCO narrative, the value of the Kumano Kodo is universal. This universality is necessary in order to market the pilgrimage to people around the globe. Yet, the Kumano Kodo is a Shinto pilgrimage, and Shintoism is predicated on the myth of Japanese ethnic uniqueness. According to this religious system, Japanese people are the lineal descendants of the gods. Shinto, then, entails the veneration of Japan's deities by their descendants. Here we confront *nihonjinron*, the myth of Japanese uniqueness. This fiction rests on the dubious claim that "pure blooded" Japanese people have access to mysteries otherwise restricted to foreigners. This fetishization of "pure blood," as well as the existence of a unique "Japanese spirit," are somewhat recent historical inventions, and like all nativist ideologies, serve only the interests of the ruling classes.

It is not our intention to simply disparage the mystique of racial uniqueness at the heart of Shinto. In the post-war era, this nativist narrative opened up a space within which Japanese people could assert their agency over and against the humiliation inflicted by the occupation of the American military. Up to the present day, Shinto serves as a bulwark against westernization, and therefore is not without merit. However, as should be clear, we are not Shintoists, not Japanese, not UNESCO diplomats, not tourists, yet not nontourists. What, then, are we, and what are we doing on this trail? It may seem both trite and obvious to state that we are pilgrims, perhaps even an obvious dodge. For us, pilgrimage is a state of in-betweenness, not only in an anthropological sense, but in a way that is religious, playful, shapeshifting, fluid. Such nebulousness frustrates the hegemony of a master narrative, and this is, was, our aim.

Returning to the Kumano Kodo, Shinto's claim to ethnic exclusivism stands in diametric opposition to the narrative of "universal value" promoted by the tourist industry. How did Matsuura and his UNESCO team navigate this impasse? Ecotourism. The ersatz ideology of secularized nature worship offers a way through this insoluble contradiction. On account of their sacred blood, Japanese pilgrims have access to the Shinto gods; whereas

the *gaijin* (foreigners) must satisfy themselves with the natural beauty of the terrain.

The Japanese heritage industry has imposed the pseudosancimonious consumerist ideology of eco-tourism on the Kumano Kodo. This matrix of understanding homogenizes the conduct, expectations, intentions, and outcomes of the pilgrimage. Eco-tourism is a machine that manufactures moral consumers, and objectifies the natural terrain as the object of their ethical consumption. As countless scholars have shown, green hyper-consumption is oxymoronic (ecotourism actually destroys the wild ecosystems sanctioned for preservation); counterproductive (indigenous people do all the work while tourist revenue flows to corporations); and culturally erosive (local people abandon traditional craftwork and trades so as to become guides and porters). Like an international fast-food chain restaurant, eco-tourism franchises offer only sameness, albeit in different locations.

To be clear, we are not accusing UNESCO, or the Tanabe City Kumano Tourist Bureau, of hiding the secrets of the Kumano Kodo. It is certainly not our intention to portray the pilgrimage administrators as a malevolent cabal pushing ecotourism out of blind greed, or anything conspiratorial (though that would make for undoubtedly interesting pilgrimage fanfiction). The reliance on eco-tourism within the Kumano region, as is the case wherever this tourist ideology dominates, is a matter of necessity. The economic collapse of the Kumano region in the post-war era was accelerated by numerous factors, including brain-drain, the aging of the population, government corruption, and the corporatization of the forest industry. Eco-tourism has brought wealth to this otherwise moribund watershed of primeval rainforests, and should be praised for lifting numerous communities out of abject poverty. However, the careful pilgrim must nonetheless remain wary of internalizing too much of this ideology lest they become alienated from both themselves and the world around them.

It would seem, then, that there is a fundamental contradiction in the UNESCO master narrative of the Kumano Kodo. The nativist exclusivism of Shinto prohibits *gaijin* from participating in the full mysteries of the pilgrimage, despite its claim to “universal” human value. Instead, foreigners are offered eco-tourism, a modern ideology of secularized nature worship. But perhaps all is not lost – from our research, we discovered that there is yet another option, a

secret network of pathways along the Kumano Kodo. In order to access this webwork of hidden meanings, though, we must burrow underneath the intellectual edifice of Shinto.

Shinto, or the “Way of the Kami,” is often presented as the indigenous religion of the Japanese people. However, that is not entirely accurate. Shinto was invented in the ninth century by the imperial house of Yamato, which subsequently imposed this ideological program on the scattered tribes that inhabited the island archipelago. The ideological program of Shinto, more accurately termed State Shinto, subsumed the archipelago’s local cults under the unitary myth of divine sovereignty. In other words, the program of Shinto was invented as a means for the imperial house of Yamato to consolidate and control the chaotic galaxy of local customs, shamanic rituals, and cultic traditions that had developed across Japan since prehistoric times. The historian of Japanese folk traditions, Gerald Figal, has explained that the fundamental purpose of Shinto was to “redirect the spiritual sentiments of the masses away from heterogeneous complexes of local belief in the supernatural and towards homogenized belief” in the unique divinity of the imperial line, which traced its ancestry back through sun-goddess Amaterasu to the celestial parents, Izanagi and Izanami.¹⁷

The imperial take-over of Japan’s spiritual universe – or the process of “Shintoization” – is omitted in the master narrative of the Kumano Kodo. However, there are rebel armies of kami who resisted co-optation. According to legend, these immortal spiritual insurrectionists retreated to the forests of > the Kii peninsula, where they sing, dance, and hunt, all in the hopes of regaining their strength.

The Black Banners of Susano-o

Divine friendship arises spontaneously. The supernatural landscape of the Kumano Kodo is a living tradition of intoxicated prophecy, illicit deification, and unruly atavism. In the previous section, mention was made of a secret network of pilgrimage paths buried deep underneath the terrestrial crust of Shinto. This esoteric underground exists as a parallel dimension of “street-level” holiness, and encompasses an alternative system of spiritual sensibilities and values unmoored from native exclusivism, upper-class snobbery, and the empty priestcraft of imperial religion. In our research, we uncovered the cypher for all that is archaic about the Kumano Kodo: Susano-o-Mikoto. Exiled brother of Amaterasu, Susano-o is the key and the gateway. Susano-o is all that dwells in the shadow of the Kumano Kodo master narrative.

Susano-o is an arbitrary icon that we chose to ground our attention in the bodily awareness of the sensorial and suprasensorial worlds. Susano-o is the name of the universe next door. Susano-o is also my shadowself, who pointed the way beyond the conformist expectations of pilgrims in the modern era. With eyes for eyes, and claws for claws, Susano-o is the doppelganger of every pilgrim who has attempted to trespass beyond the horizon of meaning created by tradition, be it orthodox or iconoclastic. Can the Kumano Kodo really even be called a pilgrimage without the threat of bandits, disease, wild animals, starvation? Pilgrimage was formerly defined by these dangers, which have now been domesticated, if not eliminated outright.

Recall the mythological origins of Japan presented in the opening of this book. According to the *Kojiki*, the early chronicle of Japan myth, the ancestress of the Japanese imperial line, Amaterasu, forsakes her brother Susano-o, as being uncouth and unworthy to hold a position in the celestial court. The scapegoat of State Shinto, Susano-o appears in folk tales as the divine foreigner, luck-bringer, and enemy of the civilized. His status as god of the borderlands can be interpreted in two ways. The exoteric interpretation of his status as the “divine foreigner” reflects the fact that he was traditionally worshipped by tribes exiled by the Yamato dynasty. Esoterically, he is associated with the borderland because he occupies the spaces outside the Shinto cosmology. As the God of

the margins, Susano-o is the center point for the innumerable constellations of nameless heresies persecuted by State Shinto.

More than a higher intelligence, Susano-o is the interstitial space between all the banal projections of religion, politics, and commerce. Susano-o welcomes all who have been exiled into oblivion by the forces of exclusivist nativism. This kami is the voice from outside.

Susano-o comes to his supplicants as a magical mode of consciousness. Susano-o is the exaltation of sense perception. Susano-o is the abyss having become aware of itself. We fly the black banners of this kami, so as to gather together the secret chiefs of the Kumano, who administer the flow of knowledge of what lies beyond the veil. A truly universal system, the path of Susano-o leads across a luminous landscape of latter-day revelations. The name of this kami is the password to the *dengaku* , or private carnivals hosted by bakemono of all sorts.¹⁸

Susano-o exists beyond physical form. Rather, this god-inexile is an affirmation of the potential friendship between beings on different plains, and a resounding refusal to submit to the pseudo-ordering of the worlds by priestly or secular authorities. Acting as the shadow of official religion, this secret pathway between worlds is not constrained in time or space. It is a moveable feast – or better, a *fête permanente* that began with time itself.

Other Monstrous Allies

By and large, the sanitized UNESCO version of the Kodo presents spirit guides as quaint collectibles, meant to be viewed with a glib smirk that says, “I know better than to believe.” We of the Order take a different approach.

In our understanding, a multi-layered cosmos occupies the same space as our own. Yet, its veils are many. The terrain described in this book cannot be located on any map, or captured by the photographer’s lens. Access to the kami realm is an initiation, and therefore depends on the degree of preparation undertaken beforehand. It is only by virtue of cultivating a “rich inner life,” so to speak, that pilgrims gain admission to the ancient forest kingdom of the spirits. Though ordinary hikers and ardent pilgrims thread through the same mountain trails, they walk entirely different paths.

According to the Pure Land school of Buddhism, the Kumano Kodo is a paradise on earth. It is important not to confuse this cosmology with the Abrahamic concept of heaven, however. The cosmic powers of the Buddhas are infused in the very earth, in the view of the Pure Land sect. We agree: the local geography itself is alive, though we feel compelled to add that, on the psychic level, kami country is far more confused and confusing than anywhere on earth. Our attention is focused on the methods for channeling this evident chaos, and tipping the luck plane in our favor.

Before taking to the road, members of our Order adopt a saint, spirit, or god to act as a companion for the upcoming journey. As mentioned above, we selected Susano-o, the god of the margins. Our pairing with this kami counteracts the lure of the tourist industry, insofar as we build our itineraries around following his traces, and not the “sights.”

Perhaps we are mistaken to suggest that divine companions can be chosen. Instead, the reverse may be true. As part of our preparatory “saturation job,” we let our minds wander over the *Encyclopedia of Strange Phenomena and Yokai of Japan* (*Nihon kaki yokai daijiten*), as well as numerous other books and monster picture scrolls. By doing so, we made ourselves available to be selected by a higher spirit. Much as in the case of relationships with humans or

animals, compatibility can be intuited immediately. Though we may drift far afield from the tourist sights, we know we are *on the road* whenever an icon of our divine friend appears. The same logic can be applied to malevolent spirits, whose appearance is a decidedly clear signal to turn around and go no further.

The father of pharmacopoeia, Dale Pendell, was preoccupied with the monstrous allies that can be won within the world of plants. Summarizing his findings, he wrote, “Name the voices. Don’t be judgmental. Be ready to make deals. Try to get something for yourself.”¹⁹ Yokai embody forces that remain invisible unless we call them by name. Alternatively, these beings emerge as sensations, hungers, trances, suspicions, levels of quietude, delusions, paranoias, frenzies, dreams, ecstasies, disassociated voices, and only rarely, appearances.

We cannot bring yokai under our control, nor do we desire to do so. The overarching aim of our Order is to befriend such beings. On rare occasions, as illustrated in the Order’s booklet on yagé, we have even switched places with them. Moreover, the yokai are not *only* natural forces. They are also the demons we carry around in our minds. In yokai we see an alphabet of psychopathologies which can be exorcised through the spiritual science of pilgrimage. But more on that later.

Ultimately, the landscape itself is a mystical creature. Yet we did not come to the Kii Peninsula to catch a glimpse of this ancient beast, the Kumano Kodo. Instead, we set out as pilgrims in the hopes that the Kodo would see *us*. To attract its hypnotic gaze, we made ablutions, gave alms, and burned offerings. The shimmering of its ten million eyes cannot be captured by the camera lens. Such vulgar attempts at capture only drive this omni-yokai deeper into its sylvan caverns. That said, meetings have been recorded.

The supernaturalism of the Kumano Kodo was expertly portrayed in Yukio Mishima’s short story “Acts of Worship.”

The protagonist is a university professor who embarks on the Kumano pilgrimage with his secretary in order to perform a rite of kuyo for the scholar’s deceased lover. Sneaking into Nachi Taisha, they conduct this magical ritual, which untethers them from their previous lives. The rite dissolves their respective identities leaving only their bond, which the author describes as a “secret religious community” of two. In their individual ego-deaths, the two were then reborn as one, a monstrosity. Similarly, the Order of St.

George's Horse is a pilgrimage war-machine powered by such mind-melding. We will revisit the telepathic connection that develops between pilgrims, which we have termed the "void machine," in a later section. Here, we will conclude by stating that dragging the Kumano Kodo bakemono into the blinding light of this world is not our aim; rather, we attempted to carry our animal selves into the otherworld.

Japanic!

One final, and unorthodox, set of preparations had to be confronted before we set out. At the time of our pilgrimage, mid-March 2020, Japan had been dealing directly with Covid19 (in its epidemic, rather than pandemic form) for over two months. Cases had remained relatively low in most areas of the country, but cities were noticeably empty. Leisure travel diminished, and most ordinary citizens chose to work from home. By the time we left Japan many weeks later, the emperor had issued a state of emergency. Doom roared across the archipelago. Doom: simmering, omnipresent, and disruptive, but not panicked, or outraged, or mad with grief and fear. We, and the people around us, proceeded with caution, like villagers living on the side of a smoking mountain.

We have no desire to bore you here with a rundown of the Covid-19 pandemic, its emergence, its spread, the ineptitude with which humanity met it. For all we know, these problems will either be quaint history or horrific present by the time this book is read, so a wild-eyed retelling of it serves little purpose here. Instead, what follows is an account of what we discovered about the layering of apocalypses on the Kumano trail – a palimpsest of threshold-awareness, ancient, current, future. But what does it mean to walk the trail as voices scream the end is nigh? What does it mean to feel the grief, fear, pain of it all, alongside pleasure, exploration, hope? If religion can teach us something, it is that these experiences have always, will always, co-exist.

Pilgrimage speaks the language of death. It is generally configured around concepts of redemption, or closeness to the divine, or as a microcosmic journey that mirrors our own steady progression from the unknown to life, to death and the unknown again. The Kumano is no exception. Stretching back thousands of years, it is a storehouse of doom lore. Its treasury of sacred history is populated by all manner of death's head phantoms that commune with travelers, scheming yokai, and gods laying nude under sleepy groves. The most popular beliefs associated with the Kodo portray the route as the royal road to the afterlife – and so it is. But not for everyone.

As a portal to the other world, pilgrimage is a total process

based on the ancient alchemy of psychological dissolution. Designed to destroy all who traverse it, the Kodo is a doomsday device made of stone, dirt, and moss. Stepping into the vortex means shedding the emotional armor that conditions the mind into prefabricated patterns of thought and behavior. An instant-cure for info-sickness, the outcome is either madness or illumination.

The Apocalypse Engine

Japan is no stranger to apocalypticism. Part of our saturation job, then, had to be a reckoning with the cultural impact of such a heavy mood. Intoning the impermanence that is axiomatic to Buddhism, laminated sheets detailing what to do in the case of tsunami were found in the pockets of every train seat. Earthquake shelters were well-marked even in the smallest towns we passed through. The trauma of nuclear disaster, first inflicted by vengeful foreigners and then repeated by the power-plant meltdown in Fukushima, produced its own sense of mutant realism, as exemplified in Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*. An even more revealing example of this mutant realism, at least in the popular imagination, is *Godzilla*, the longest running film franchise in cinema history.

The script for the original *Godzilla* film, *Gojira*, illustrates the theological underpinning of extreme destruction. Recall the opening shot of the film, in which the director recreates the detonation of the first high-yield thermonuclear weapon (codename: Castle Bravo) by the American military. Conducted off the coast of Japan, the geo-trauma produced by this nuclear weapons-test summoned the king of the monsters out of its dreamless sleep at the bottom of the ocean. As an allegory of atomic warfare, *Godzilla* is a travesty of nature.²⁰ Yet, the monster's rampage, and the subsequent destruction of Tokyo, is more than a cinematic spectacle. This paleolithic dragon spirit is a divine messenger, bearing the apocalyptic gospel of catharsis to the people of Japan. The *Godzilla* films literally constitute what Hideaki Anno termed a "neon-genesis evangelion."

This gargantuan sea-monster typifies a special class of kami, termed *yonaoshi*, which roughly translates to "divine agent of world renewal."²¹ Historically, *yonaoshi* gods arise within the folk imagination, giving voice to society's subconscious desires for a new beginning. Their heavenly news is self-evident: With All Rebirth Comes Death. Much like the god-child psychic-protagonist of Otomo's *Akira*, *Godzilla* destroys so that the world can be renewed.²² Cleanser of the metropolis, its fire breath literally breathes life into the moribund urban society. Moreover, this *yonaoshi* does not destroy all of Tokyo, but instead concentrates its fury on a few key

landmarks, principally the Ginza shopping district, the outward symbol of the country's modern Westernization.²³ Projecting this logic to the imaginal realm of the Kumano Kodo, I struggle with the suspicion that Susano-o was Godzilla, and I am the decadent society awaiting annihilation. But even the total destruction of all Western tourist-pilgrims would not bring back the primeval forest of the Kii peninsula.

Gods' Graveyards

It became clear to us that the pandemic of 2020 was but one more disaster-stone stacked upon the Kumano's trails. Indeed, if anything, the pandemic forced death back into the conversation, in spite of the tourist industry's best effort to make pilgrimage just another form of harmless, safe, anaesthetizing travel. In the cosmological imagination of Japan, Kumano is *Yomi-no-kuni*, the Land of the Dead. The region came into being as the Graveyard of the Gods: Kumano is the burial place of the divine family Izanagi and Izanami, the divine ancestors of all *Nihon-jin* (Japanese people). The stench of death has lingered across the millennia.

With the ascendancy of doomsday sects in the Kumano region in the Kamakura period (1192-1333 CE), the galaxy of local apocalyptic beliefs coalesced into *mappo* (the "age of strife" in Buddhist doctrine). According to this apocalyptic chronotope, humanity had fallen and the teachings of the Buddha (or *dharma*) were corrupted. Priestly preppers met planetary doom by preserving sutras in deep, underground vaults, while their more enterprising brethren evangelized the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage as the only hope for salvation. The first Kumano Kodo pilgrimage boom thus ensued, as the imperial nobility, landed gentry, and samurai class stormed this backwater region so as to cleanse themselves in preparation for The End.

The power of the gods is directly proportional to the scale of human death. Accordingly, the number of pawasupotto along the Kodo increased exponentially in the Sengoku period (1465-1615 CE), when Japan descended into an epoch of inter-factional feuding and civil wars. The routes became overpopulated with kami, yokai, bodhisattvas, and other supernatural entities that moved between cryptotheological classifications. Their incursions into human affairs are commemorated in the *oji*, the subsidiary shrines that line the path today. Sadly, the tales recounted on the *oji* serve as the only narrative foundation for pilgrims, who are neither induced nor inclined to study up on the pilgrimage themselves. Like layers of sediment reaching down to the earth's core, the Kumano Kodo's mythopoesis is impossibly dense.

A Call to the Master

The elder master of our Order picked up the phone after three rings. Much of the Order's philosophy of travel was inspired by her writings on *intentional travel* and I was eager to compare our notes on the modern art of pilgrimage.

Evidently it's all spectacle now. No one seems to be very serious about the religious aspects of the Camino de Santiago, or any of the other trails. Ask yourself, how can there be a pilgrimage if there are no pilgrims? What you have left is tourism, and tourists. Sometimes I think that there are more tourists than human beings. Perhaps they come from outer space. Tourism, too, is a consciousness plague, insofar as it ruins everything it touches. Perhaps I already mentioned how I tell the difference between shrines and tourist sites? The more people visit a shrine, the more power it accumulates. Conversely, tourist sites only become more miserable as the number of visitors increases.

I found myself nodding in agreement as she spoke – but the question of the tourist and the pilgrim continued to play on my mind. Where does one end, and the other begin? I was not alone in this musing. Parsing the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim has remained a thorn in the side of pilgrimage studies for decades. Indeed, pilgrims themselves are not outside criticism; in premodern Europe, screeds alleging their frivolity and stupidity sound very much like contemporary condemnations of tourists and the tourism industry.²⁴ Today, some scholars claim there is a substantive difference between the pilgrim and the tourist, while others experts insist the two are one and the same. Our own “saturation job” with Kumano research provided no clear answers. There is simply no empirical measurement for deducing the ideal, authentic pilgrim over and against the deluded, passive tourist. Indeed, the more we read, the more we realized that we could not avoid the plain fact that, historically, the pilgrims of the Kumano over the centuries were *both* aristocratic tourists *and* authentic pilgrims.

Though the individual pawasupotto along the Kumano holy road date back to the stone age, the cultic institution of the Kumano Sanzan was created by the imperial elite of the eleventh century. The trail between the three grand shrines of Kumano was opened by the Retired Emperor Uda in 907, who was followed by Emperor Kazan, and Emperor Shirakawa, who walked the pilgrimage nine times between 1072-86. Their enthusiasm for pilgrimage was shared by their kingly successors, including Emperor Toba, who trekked the Kumano Kodo twenty-one times, and Emperor Goshirakawa, who made the trip thirty-three times.²⁵

As mentioned earlier, these divine figureheads utilized the pilgrimage to stage an elaborate ritual in which they allegedly abdicated their political dominion over the kingdom so as to attain religious power over the entirety of earth. By visiting the legendary birthplace of the royal bloodline, which runs all the way back to the cosmic parentage of Amaterasu, these emperors were transformed into “dharma kings.” The power of these supposedly retired emperors became so great that Japan was ruled by a succession of these retired, or “secluded,” god-emperors working behind the scenes throughout the Kamakura period (1185-1333). What is important to our discussion, however, is that god-emperors’ pilgrimages entailed an enormous mobilization of resources – and, because of their aristocratic proclivities, a high degree of luxury.

Starting from the old capital in Kyoto, the Kumano Kodo took roughly thirty days to traverse.²⁶ The divine monarchs who made the trip were customarily accompanied by hundreds and even thousands of family members, courtesans, astrologers, cooks, monks, militiamen, porters, and poets. Feeding and housing this mob was made somewhat easier by the fact that formerly isolated forest villages were rebuilt into semi-permanent, rustic carnivals, whose array of pleasures mirrored the *fujiwara* (floating pleasure world) district in the archipelago’s major cities. Tea houses, brothels, nightmarkets, and theatres far outnumbered temples and shrines in some parts of the Kii peninsula, though distinguishing between them is difficult. This indistinguishability is reflected in the fact that the Japanese term *ennichi* refers to both “holy days” and “markets,” as a prominent historian of Japanese pilgrimage has noted.²⁷

Pilgrims from lower economic strata were similarly inclined to make merry during the pilgrimage through the Kii Peninsula. Much

as in the case of premodern Europe, the majority of medieval Japanese people were tied to the land, and thereby prohibited from traveling freely. Warmaking and trade provided exceptions, along with pilgrimage. Historical records dating from roughly a millennium ago indicate that a tiny minority of peasants were given permission to leave their fief to make pilgrimages. However, lack of funds, travel guides, documentation, medicine, and weapons (for selfdefense) proved to be significant deterrents to all but the wealthiest pilgrims. This all changed with the eruption of *nuke mari* (slipping away for pilgrimage) in the eighteenth century.

The second boom in mass pilgrimage began abruptly as indentured servants, child laborers, and farmhands – all chronically overworked – tossed off their responsibilities to join massive pilgrimage conga-lines that snaked through the streets of Nara, Osaka, and Kyoto towards the Grand Shrine at Ise. As Helen Hardacre has demonstrated, an unprecedented number of workers were swept up in the *nuke mari* craze of the 1700s, with some sacred processions amassing upwards of 100,000 people.²⁸ Needless to say, the pilgrim masses were not somber ascetics, but more akin to present-day spring-breakers in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. In sum, they regarded pilgrimage as a time to enjoy themselves, and the wide world around them. Here, it is instructive to remember that tourism itself is the child of pilgrimage.

We may conclude, then, that bourgeois tourism has been an integral part of the Kumano Kodo for the last thousand years. Therefore, if pilgrims of today want authenticity, then they should be prepared to balance haughty fantasies of asceticism with a headlong dive into all of the luxurious amenities – local delicacies, tipples, and baubles – offered on the road. The feast is, after all, perhaps the best bellwether of the authentic – equal parts ritual and pleasure, entertainment and *communitas*.

It must be said, then, that we initially envisioned this book as a boulder. In writing these chapters, we asked the gods to place this immovable object in the way of the bourgeois tourists, who we feared were clogging up the winding pilgrimage roads with social media photoshoots. However, the only path blocked by this boulder was our own. According to our tutelary spirit, Susano-o, these fears are the fears of a tourist in the spirit world. “Extinguish thoughts of authenticity,” the voice said. “The people on the road are your true brothers and sisters,” it continued. “Authenticity is generosity.”

The kami speak in the language of annoyance, irritations, and pain. Recall that hell is other people. Yet, fatigue is holy, as it leads to surrender, which is a foretaste of the metaphysical death that awaits on the pilgrimage path.

Our tutelary spirit led us to see that the process of death and rebirth is not an individual trip. Rather, death comes to the illusion of individuality. The isolated pilgrim must die so that the pilgrim collectivity could be born anew, each day.

It occurred to us then that the question of the shrine's power may have very little to do with the whims and intentions of its human visitors. What happens to shrine sites that fall into disuse? The limitations of this question became clear once we took up the trail – as you will see. Shrines, we found, are rarely ever only home to humans, whether tourists or worshipers; at best, they are radio towers transmitting presence.

In the meantime, I continued my hauntological speculations on abandoned shrines. Perhaps the pandemic can spread to the celestial spheres. Perhaps mappo originated in the heavens and spread downward into the human world through the reverse osmosis of prayer. Then, perhaps, the gods will join the people who have barricaded themselves in their homes. With all the shrines closed, kami and people will cohabitate as never before, and perhaps this will give way to a renaissance of dream initiations; democratic oneiromancy; each night will be a carnival of human/god marriages; incubi and succubi speed-dating. Perhaps there will be a return of Asclepian physicians, who prescribe not drugs but “incubation,” wherein patients must sleep outside a temple so that a visiting god can heal their affliction.

Living with kami who have been shut out of their former temples will have immense benefits. As a show of thanks, they stage entire operas for the sole benefit of dreamers. Living out planetary lifecycles in the dreamlands, then, forces the sleazy entertainment industry into abject bankruptcy. Instead of watching screens, people inhabit waking dreams. In this immunofuturist world, paperback reprints of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* are bestsellers in every known language. A new inverted psychoanalysis arises, in which everyday life is scrutinized for allegorical keys that unlock doors into the deepest recesses of the nocturnal landscapes. Architecture is abandoned, as the best and brightest designers relocate to fungal arcologies where they rebuild and destroy according to the

collective unconsciousness of the planet. None speak of lucid dreaming, but only lucid living, in which everyday life is poeticized by the voluptuous agape of impossibly fragrant flowerbeds....

The onset of these notions signifies our preparations are complete. It is time to set aside the books of others and begin to sketch out our own. St. James of the Wayward Path of the Celestial Road has greeted us with these visions, and we depart only by his grace.

*Field Notes for
the Nakahechi Route*

A Note on Spirit Visitations

Pilgrimage is an ancient religious operation that transfigures the body and soul. While some pilgrimages last only an afternoon, their effect can resonate for an entire lifetime. Traversing the Nakahechi route took my companion and me six days, though this measurement does not reflect the actual duration or texture of our time on the Kodo. The passage of time was abnormal, even unpredictable, for most of the journey, as is the case with innerspace travel occasioned by the psychedelic sacraments. At its core, pilgrimage is what Michel Foucault has called a “technology of the self,” which entails an intentionally difficult course of travel conducted with intensive concentration towards a destination that is sacred.

At Yunomine, a pawasupotto we describe at length in what follows, we overheard a junior monk from the Tendai school explain that ideas have shapes, and some of these shapes are so enormous that they require hours of quiet concentration to cogitate. In his view, pilgrimage opens up a portal into the psyche where inhuman enormities can be contemplated. That is to say, pilgrimage is a medium of communication through which extraordinary knowledge is revealed. Dwelling in such marathon quietude, the mind shifts from inconsequential chatter to intensive self-scrutiny, which unfolds into deeper levels of silence. Here we are visited by distant ancestors, deceased grandparents departed family, and lost friends. These other Voices tutor us in the arts of esoteric listening. As the shade of an old comrade divulged to me at the holy bath of healing in Yunomine, the dead are always ready to offer counsel – “but the line is always busy.”

During our journey from Kii-Tanabe to Kumano Nachi Taisha, spirit visitations struck as unexpectedly as lightning bolts. Panic, terror, and wonderment were woven into the texture of everyday life. Yet we were not always at their mercy. There were times when we were forced to dominate the phantasms and spectral denizens of the Kodo; ferocious, our howls echoed like thunder across the mountains. How could such erratic behavior not appear to the outside onlooker as comical, if not a little frightening? The death/rebirth process of pilgrimage is as strange as it is old, like the

Kumano Kodo itself. This strangeness comes with its own axiomatic truths; for example, sacred mountains only respond to intimidation, primordial trees must be humored, and sacred stones must be seduced if they are to become allies.

Perhaps it will come as no surprise that troublesome spirits prefer disrupting pilgrims during their most contemplative moments. This is especially true of the Kumano region's most famous phantasm: the *daru* .

Even the Kumano Kodo Tourist Bureau cannot help but note the threat posed by the trail's boldest yokai. Trailwalkers are warned about these spectral nuisances on government-issued placards between Nonaka and Hosshinmon-oji, as well as the maps distributed by the Tanabe City Kumano Tourist Bureau. That said, the most concise definition of the *daru* is offered in the official tourist bureau guidebook:

Travelers in the area are sometimes overcome by *daru* spirits, serpent-like witch creatures capable of assuming invisible form, penetrating the human body, and inflicting a variety of painful torments. Because serpents are fond of eggs, oval shaped rocks are offered to appease these evil spirits.²⁹

There were days when the *daru* harassed us unceasingly, as you will see. However, these were not the only spirits we encountered.

The Kumano Kodo is the otherworld home of kami, yokai, shinigami, ayakashi, mononoke, and bodhisattvas, as more than a millennia of pilgrim literature attests. There are also *henge* (shapeshifters) that adopt the guise of other beings, including fellow travelers and day hikers. To be sure, the bestiary featured in this chapter does not reflect the depth and richness of Japan's boundless tradition of cryptozoological taxonomy. The creatures we did encounter, though, received our full and lasting attention.

As monsters ourselves, we observed the phantasms through many different sets of eyes, and, if needed, none at all. Friedrich Nietzsche would have termed our *thousand-eyed* interpretation as the "polyfocal approach" to life. At times, we recognized the other Voices as indeed the mischievous, malevolent, and at times playful creatures so obsessively indexed by the master scholars of yokai, Toriyama Seiken (1712-1788), Inoue Enryo (1859-1919), and

Shigeru Mizuki (1922-2015). In this view, the trail features a rogue's gallery of karmic adjusters, akin to the divine bureaucrats so lavishly depicted in Taoist art. Defining conventional narration, our relationships with the yokai fluctuated between the sensible and the supersensate. For example, walking between Ukegawa and Koguchi, an ancient humanoid figure no bigger than a beetle climbed off his toadstool so as to lead us through the proverbial looking-glass, and into the luminous, webworking oases of materialized spirit. Here, our mechanistic time-sense dissolved. Taking shape in the air before our eyes, bewildering hyperdimensional prophecies, thick as wild honey, dribbled from our mouths. Gothic cathedral spaceships arrived to carry us down the rivers of cosmic ghosts. Crawling upon the shores of these haunted mountain rainforests, we observed the Kumano taking back its old form. Everything is inhabited by individual spirits.

Looking through yet another set of eyes, we recognized our otherworldly interlocutors as externalizations of our own psychological processes. Inflamed by the global outbreak of the corona virus, the divine madness of paranoia melted subconsciousness into everyday, waking awareness. My companion and I took on a new collective identity, as our individual perspectives blurred into a constant ESP stream. (Comparing our supernormal experiences of any pilgrim against Shigeru Mizuki's masterful series of yokai listed in the encyclopedia *Nihon Yokai Taizen* would surely yield important results; however, we suspect that the revelations would be far too personal to be of any interest to readers.)

Our polyfocal approach included yet another perspective, or "reality tunnel," to borrow an expression from Robert Anton Wilson. We accepted the cryptids as simply masks through which the Kumano Kodo itself spoke. Since the yokai demarcate the conceptual limit of current plausibility structures, we felt secure in leaving our weird encounters under-theorized.

Void Machine

Surveying the foremost scholarship of pilgrimage, I noticed that many of the great works were co-authored by couples. The most recognizable example is *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, by Victor and Edith Turner. The expert on Japan pilgrimage, Ian Reader, has similarly conducted research with his wife, Deborah. I added this observation to our pilgrimage research

dossier, into a subsection labeled “void machine.”

In this file, we compiled data on the transpersonal dimension of human instrumentality. Our thinking on the matter was colored by Kurt Vonnegut, and particularly his concept of the “duprass.” Vonnegut introduced the term in *Cat’s Cradle* as a means of describing lovers who had melded their minds together. A similar phenomenon is mentioned in *The Dharma Bums*, the secret sourcebook for the Beat Generation’s Americanization of Shugendo. Recall the scene mid-way up the Sierra Nevada, when Gary Snyder abruptly stops in his tracks in order to show Kerouac how they had been communicating telepathically “just like animals” during their otherwise silent hike up the mountain.

Since telepathic accord has become such a popular trope in the supernatural fiction of today, no further elaboration here is unnecessary. Instead, I offer a poetic image, which captures the visceral sensation of hivemind sharing. Look: an impossible density of thorny kudzu overruns the mental architecture of neighboring cities, which a mysterious extinction event had reduced to ruins, along with the entire planet.

Our void machine was built from composite parts, all of which work towards stabilizing and maintaining the annihilation of our egos. Of course, there would be a little suffering involved: breakdown to breakthrough. The melding of minds entailed a process of dehumanization, preparing us to intercourse with the bakemono, who tended to avoid, or worse, actively dislike humans. Though born mortal human beings, we had to reassure these wonderful creatures that we were not interlopers, or intruders, but fellow travelers. Like them, we too had been reborn on the monstrous path of the Kumano Kodo.

In sum, this book has two authors, yet the text is written from the point of view of a single person. Our narration is a transmission from the other side – we built the void machine to transmit this broadcast.

So as to better capture the metabolism of our pilgrim lives, this chapter is an anthology of field notations intercut with dream-visions. The medieval warrior Taira no Kiyomori (1118 – 1181) established the precedent for conducting dream divination, or *oneiromancy*, while on the Kumano Kodo. According to this sleepworld emissary, and companion of Emperor Go-Shirakawa, the Kumano gods speak through dreams. Their spectral instructions

dress the wound of reality.

Tuned into the Kodo's occult laws of causality, we followed an eccentric path along the Nakahechi route. Instead of trekking the conventional pilgrimage trail, we investigated premonitions and subsequently proceeded downstream according to omens, weather patterns, and the distribution of hot springs. Since we did not re-order the narrative so that it artificially conforms to the linear stages of the Nakahechi route, our tale resembles a geographic montage. Though this style of presentation may be unorthodox, it is the most accurate means of conveying the uncanny atmosphere we encountered on the Kumano Kodo.

Now, let us proceed to our modern sketch of this ancient pilgrimage.

The Portal at Kii-Tanabe

Distance traveled: *144 kilometers (train from Osaka to Kii-Tanabe); 11 kilometers (car ride from Kii-Tanabe to guesthouse)*
Foods consumed: *Bento boxes from train station (gyudon and katsudon); instant ramen; Haribo Happy Cola gummies*
Drinks slurped: *Ito-en green tea; Sapporo cans; One Cup saké*
Panic attacks: *1*
Shit blasts: *1*
Sock changes: *0*
Surrenders: *1*

We devoted the days leading up to our pilgrimage to rites of purification that prepared us for the ritual process of death/rebirth. Led by the Osaka branch of our confraternity, these ceremonies culminated in a multi-day feast that depleted our bodies, mind, and soul. The final ritual, *mizu no sakazuki* (the farewell cup of water), was conducted in the early morning hours on the day of our departure. The rite was led by the lodge grandmasters, Raz & Kaz, who tended to our nascent hangovers by feeding us bottle upon bottle of *genkidrinks* consisting mostly of turmeric extract. Recalling an article I had read on the *mizu no sakazuki* rites of kamikaze pilots, I recited an impromptu poem on the transience of the seasons. Then, as the sun began to rise, the grandmasters wished us well on our journey and dutifully accepted our last wills and testaments, in accordance with this ancient pilgrimage ritual. We departed under an angry sun, and boarded the Nozomi Shinkansen at Shin-Osaka. Our destination: Kii-Tanabe.

Dream Trains

Osaka is a major metropolitan area; Kii-Tanabe is a rural township. The train between them is empty because of the outbreak of the corona virus. Upon finding our seats, we used the last of our alcohol wipes to disinfect the armrests, window sill, and tray tables. We

added three medicinal beers to our lunch bentos, in consideration of the paranoid atmosphere sweeping across the globe. Heavy solar rays shone through the window, inducing heavy slumber. Zonked, I descended into the dream world. Zzzzzzzzz. Zzzzzzz. Zzzzzz.

The dream opened with a long corridor, with checkerboard marble floor tiles. The whitewashed walls were lined with different doorways, each of which corresponded to a layer of religious meaning projected onto the Kodo.

On my immediate left is the first passageway, made of gnarly oak and labeled *SHUGENDO*. The door itself is overgrown with violently colorful flowers smelling of ozone and dripping with the poisonous nectar of immortality. Further down the hallway on the left is a vermilion torii gate. Beneath this imposing stone structure is a deep shag carpet of fiery reds and oranges leading inward. To the side is a plaque reading, *SHINTO: This way to the burial site of the primordial creator goddess, Izanami-no-mikoto came down from Heaven to found the kingdom of Japan. Her descendant, the god-emperor Jimmu, is buried here too* . Even further down the hallway are gold-inlaid gates labeled *PURE LAND BUDDHISM* , locked firmly with a chain of moonlight. Beyond that is the spiral funhouse rope-bridge leading into *SHINGON*.

The journey to the end of the hallway feels as though it is lasting ten lifetimes. Having finally arrived, I am surprised to discover that there is no door at all. Instead of a passageway, there is simply a crude diorama depicting a miniature forest scene above which hangs the sign *ECO-TOURISM*. The pathetic display case is set into the wall at eye-level. Next to the viewing window is a VR headset with nasal plugs dangling from a white plastic hook. By wearing the headset and noseplugs, users can view a panorama film interspersed with nauseating nasal injections of “forest rain,” a perfume trademarked by the tourist office and made with industrial cleaning products, recycled sewage, and high fructose corn syrup.

Religious meaning is layered atop itself, and like geological strata, nothing is demarcated by clear-cut divisions. Is it possible to sample these traditions like an array of strange drugs? As the train pulls into Kii-Tanabe station, I am reminded that dreams are the telephone of the gods.

Braincenter

Kii-Tanabe is the most common disembarkation point for pilgrims walking the Nakahechi trail. We had a few hours before our host was to retrieve us, so we visited the Tanabe City Kumano Tourist Bureau, the braincenter of the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage industry. Considering its presence online, the tourist bureau of my imagination was a bustling hive of millennial technoserfs buzzing inside a translucent egg of living glass. Instead, we were greeted by two middle-aged Japanese people working behind a reception desk and a polite Irishman, who greeted us with an exaggerated bow. I engaged him in some idle chatter for a few minutes before mentioning the UNESCO caper, which failed to spark his interest. Considering his job as a tourist operator, it is not difficult to imagine that he had already been pushed beyond the saturation point of Kumano lore. We left without acquiring any valuable information.

Our host was kind enough to pick us up at Tanabe station and drive us to his place out in the countryside. However, we would have to kill a few hours before he could pick us up, and the time-stretch was excruciating. The wait transformed my hangover into something more grim. Suddenly, a bolt of inspiration stuck – this may possibly not be an ordinary hangover. The preparation rituals conducted by the Osaka contingent of our confraternity were evidently successful, as I was already attracting fantastic spirits. Flipping to the back of my notebook, I demarcated a page for research on curses. My first inquiry: “does Japan have anything akin to the evil eye?”

The mildness of my symptoms suggest I may have encountered a *hitodama*, a lost soul that floats through the air as a spectral orb absorbing the vital energies of the humans it passes through. The only remedy, at least according to the yokai encyclopedia of Toriyama Sekien (1712 -1788), is to recite a magic poem, which I had copied down in my notes as follows:

tama wa mitsu,
nushi wa dare tomo shiranedomo
mushubi todomeyo
shitagai no tsuma.

We wandered the streets of Kii-Tanabe, normally a bustling little town. Whether due to the time of day, or the pandemic, or a

combination of both, however, the city was deserted. Rows of host and hostess bars and izakayas sat quiet, some apparently closed indefinitely. The oppressive atmosphere led us to seek respite at Tokei-jinja.

The first shrine of our pilgrimage, Tokei-jinja is dedicated to an oracular cock fight that determined the fate of Tanabe. It was staged by the son of Benkei (1155-1189), a Zen warrior-turned-hermit famed in the annals of Japanese Buddhism for achieving enlightenment by coughing up a black bolus of snot. Though his wild-style theology had meant so much to me as a youth, this pawasupotto produced no effect on us. Perhaps we had fried our circuits during the purification ceremonies in Osaka.

With dark purple spirals of alienation floating around our heads, we returned to the parking lot outside the train station. A quiet feeling of dissoluteness nipped at our heels. I bought a pack of Haribo Happy Colas, a tried-and-true mood elevator, in an attempt to dissipate the feelings of nausea and dread that beat down upon us like the late afternoon sun, but only the arrival of our host, and departure from Kii-Tanabe, brought comfort. Sometimes, retreat is the only viable strategy. We surrendered the city.

Excremeditation

Hiroshi manages a *minshuku*, a traditional residential accommodation in which rooms are separated by a sliding tatami screen. When these lodgings are full of pilgrims, night time is often an opera of snoring, flatulence, and rhythmic breathing. The countryside can be too quiet sometimes; so, like many seasoned travelers, I delight in the frequent tooting of gaseous emissions as I lay my head to rest. Sadly, we were the only people booked into his accommodations that night.

We were staying with Hiroshi because there are no accommodations in the remote mountain village of Takijirioji, home of the Nakahechi trailhead. The drive to his minshuku was roughly thirty minutes, and much to my delight, the topic of our conversation turned to local folklore. Upon learning that we were writing a book on the Kumano Kodo, he turned the discussion to the homespun traditions native to the area. His discourse focused on a religious custom which certain esotericists in the West, and the Church of the SubGenius in particular, term “excremeditation.”

Here is what he said:

"Since this is the countryside, going anywhere takes a long time, and naturally, the urge to shit strikes without warning. The unexpected need to go crapping has always afflicted people, and in the Edo period [1615-1865], a legend developed around a Buddhist saint, or bodhisattva, who was honored as the patron of undisturbed caca-making. His devotees sang certain sutras ensuring good digestion and healthy release of savory food. While evacuating their bowels, they crouched as low to the earth as possible, unfixed their vision so as to become sort of cross-eyed, and after dropping dung, rose in perfect silence to inspect their ordure. The more rank the turd, the healthier the body, or so it was believed. Though this may seem counterintuitive to modern minds, our medieval forbears regarded extremely odoriferous shit as evidence of a successful exorcism. Such evacuations indicated the balancing of the humors. It was all wrapped up in the context of agricultural fertility."

He went on to express his doubts that the tradition of this folk saint lived on in the metropolises. Nonetheless, it is very much alive outside of Tanabe, along with folk tales of the *akanamé* (shiteaters), red demons with long tongues who inhabit especially dirty outhouses.

Hiroshi, who proved to be something of an authority on scatological theologies, went on to explain how the story of Kawayaya represents the oldest piece of Japanese shitlore. This kami was born of the god-droppings of Izanagi, the celestial being who gave birth to the sun goddess Amartarasu, who begat the Heavenly Grandson Jimmu, who begat the Imperial family who continue to occupy the throne today. The celestial shitter, Izanagi, was born and died in the Kii peninsula, which means that Kawayaya is a local deity, and therefore especially attuned to the needs of pilgrims on the Kumano Kodo. Moreover, according to our host, Kawayaya can be induced to live in the bathrooms of ordinary Japanese people – provided they build the kami an altar in the vicinity of the toilet. This additional piece of information caught my attention, as members of our pilgrim order are encouraged to hang their initiation diploma in the privy, alongside provocative images they have clipped from art books, comics, and the newspaper. We borrowed this custom from the American surrealist Henry Miller, whose novel *Tropic of Cancer* was banned by the US government for many decades. We keep a toilet shrine at home, and so I made a note reminding myself to

clear an area for an altar to Kawayá.

Hiroshi continued the discourse on other excremental theologies. My notes, however, only include mention of the Tibetan Buddhists who still revere the shit of the Dalai Lama, which court alchemists collected and transmuted into medicinal amulets and protective talismans. My attention had wandered outside the conversation and into the verdant countryside zooming by.

After some silence, he erupted: *Aha! We're here.* The car stopped. The driver asked us to stay in our seats and quickly jumped out of the car, dashing into the tall brush. After about ten minutes he returned. Pointing, he said, *Buddha shit pit in that field.* We got out of the car, and he guided us over to a massive open sewer, above which stood a concrete buddha. The sublime pungency of the pit awoke us from our long ontological sleep, like existential smelling salts. It was our first effective pawasupotto.

Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai

After arriving at his place, we spent a few hours watching the starfires in a sky of black velvet. This was the night in which we drifted, finally, off the Kumano Kodo, and onto an even more ancient trail, the Susano-o Kodo.

In exchange for an overview of our research on the Kumano Kodo, our host taught us a Buddhist parlor game, *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai*. Roughly translated as “A Gathering of One Hundred Weird Tales,” this contest was popular among samurai in the Edo period (1603-1868), and consists of lighting as many candles as there are guests in a room that is otherwise totally dark. Each guest is asked to tell a ghost story, after which a single candle is extinguished. This impromptu supernatural symposium lasts until the final story is told, the final candle is blown out, and the room is plunged into total darkness. With the sake flowing freely, our host informed us that the ritual opens a window into the ghost world.

The legends we heard that night were prismatic shards reflecting neon beams of fright, joy, and humor. It would have been a breach of etiquette to take notes, alas. Having retired to my futon, though, I poured out almost a dozen pages of vision-thoughts into my notebook before the rosy fingers of dawn chased me into dreamland. Reviewing those pages now, I notice that my ideas kept spiraling back to a sutra uttered long ago by the funkadelic grandmaster George Clinton, “The bird waits in the egg/God waits for his unfoldment in man.”

The wild child son of the creator Gods, Susano-o was no less out there in the wilds of the Kumano than in my own heart. The kami had to be awoken, so I resolved to collect all the rogue children of this tutelary spirit. I was resolved to use *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai* as a tool for channeling Susano-o. Our stories would be as burn offerings to this fiendish celestial.

As the stories unfolded that night, I watched the incense smoke coil and disintegrate. The invented word for ancient road, *kodo*, is easily confused for the Japanese word for incense. The similarity haunted me, and had me thinking more about burnt offerings.

From then on, I started collecting samples of locally-made incense, *an-soku-ko*, which was produced in many of the rural

hamlets we passed through while on the Kodo. Throughout the rest of the journey, I staged many rounds of hyakumonogatari kaidankai, and each time burnt a different stick of incense. As such, each distinctive aroma imprinted a different set of weird tales onto my mind. Furthermore, the stories returned on command as soon as I sniffed a stick. A technological breakthrough in the science of olfactory hauntology!

Ghosts & Other Business

Just after sunrise, I crept to the bathroom without turning on any lights. The house was still sleeping, and I wanted to be as discreet as possible. Upon finding the toilet seat, my first response was to ignore the keypad next to the toilet. I had already located the seat, paper, and flusher. Any additional features would only complicate the transaction. Yet: first time a scholar, second time a pervert. I began to push the buttons systematically. The bidet had the standard features, in addition to a few that were new to me. Though Westerners tend to focus on the button that produces soft music to mask the sounds of shitting and pissing, I was most taken with the knob that summons a gust of hot air to dry the user's undercarriage. Most bidets leave you with a wet ass.

We met Hiroshi in the front of his inn a little after 7am, as he had offered to give us a lift to the trailhead at Takijiri-oji. As he drove down the winding mountain roads to the highway, I nudged the conversation back towards folklore. I asked if he thought that ghostlore and folk-beliefs were pure superstition, and shared the idea, held by many today, that the spectral world had been destroyed by modernity – whether through deforestation, electricity, internet connectivity, or some other industrial malady. His response was laconic: *Not sure, but if any ghosts lived in my guesthouse, I'd charge them rent!* Until we arrived at our destination, my mind was preoccupied with the implications and hidden meanings of his comment.

Takijiri-oji to Tsugizakura-oji

Distance traveled: *16.8 kilometers (walking); elevation gain ~1260, elevation loss ~850*

Foods consumed: *onigiri; pepperoni-pizza-flavored potato chips; ham and cheese sandwiches; garlic mushrooms; soy chicken; natto; rice; egg custard; ume ice cream*

Drinks slurped: *Water; Pocari Sweat; Aquarius; ume juice; sake; umeshu*

Panic attacks: *3*

Shit blasts: *1*

Sock changes: *1*

Surrenders: *2*

Following Hiroshi's denial of further supernatural talk, the car ride passed in silence. As we put more kilometers between us and Kii-Tanabe, the mountains swelled into giant green lumps cleaved by clear rivers. Finally, we reached the official beginning of the Nakahechi route at Takijiri-oji. I will admit that I had barely looked at the material on the trail we had picked up in Kii-Tanabe, which included a detailed trail map marking the location of roadside shrines known as *oji*, vending machines, and elevation. This would prove to be a mistake.

Hiroshi left us at a small rest area, its shops closed because of the early hour. No matter, we thought, as we had packed several bottles of water, medicinal beer and sake, onigiri, sandwiches and chips. An orange cat dozed in the sun in front of a small shrine. I remembered my Camino practice of counting and noting down all the cats we encountered – here was the first. Speaking to the heavens, I named him Bungus. Just beyond the sleepy feline (the first kami, perhaps?), the trail started with a sharp incline. So up we ascended.

Test of Faith, or a letter to friends

The following is an excerpt from a communiqué authored in situ later that day:

.... Hard to know what tone to strike for pandemic pilgrimage letter-writing, so I'll tell a story about fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. The very first day of the trail was all uphill. My lungs worked overtime the entire way. About two hours in, we came to a big boulder marked by a placard reading "Test of Faith." There was a little tunnel through it, and the sign said it led to the other side after passing by a turtle-shaped stone within. Recognizing an initiatic rite when we saw one, we dove into the subterranean cavern. Burrowing down into the earth, the passage became smaller, narrower, tighter. Then, suddenly, I was horribly, terribly certain that I was stuck. Tears rose to my eyes. It was a little death. "I can't do it!" I told my companion, who had already emerged on the other side. "OK," he said. And with that simple acceptance, I surrendered. I declared NO to the Kodo, and this was accepted. No false encouragements, overly optimistic reassurances – just acceptance. Still stuck, I sobbed. Eventually I wiggled out, and then paused for a moment to take a great, heaving, tear-wracked deep breath. We held each other, and laughed a little. Test of faith indeed. The fear happened, I felt it all, but now it wasn't just my own. It was out there, shared, among the cypress trees, the big boulder, my companion, the cat at the foot of the hill. It was not my first time in the rebirthing chamber, and it was not to be the last....

And so we traversed the second pawasupotto.

Encountering the Daru

Though we considered ourselves somewhat expert in the ways of pilgrimage, our hubris became almost immediately evident on this first day. One can write books about pilgrimages in the abstract

until blue in the face – but the reality of undertaking such a journey is something else entirely. Sometimes you have to relearn pilgrimage lessons that you were sure you already knew: eat when you are hungry, drink when you are thirsty, rest when you are tired. These directives seem obvious enough, but it is easy to neglect them on the trail, where one is subject to the mistaken ideas of either *pushing oneself* or being overly cautious about rationing.

To be sure, it is never a good idea to drink all of your water in the first hour, nor to assume that supplies will be forthcoming later on. But it is equally dangerous to be overly conservative, or to stay too close to rules that might serve you well in everyday life. For example, it is generally good practice to skip snacks between meals; yet, on the trail, there is no reason to impose such draconian measures. Especially after 10 km uphill. Especially with a fully-stocked food bag.

It is also important to take advantage of plenty when it presents itself. During our time on the trail, the god of abundance, Ebisu, appeared most often as a solitary vending machine, inexplicably positioned next to a remote forest picnic table. This jovial techno-power prefers 100 yen coins, but will accept other denominations, too. Your transactional worship yields immediate benefits: cool water, salty Pocari Sweat, slightly sweet Aquarius. Finding such a machine-god, it is important to ask for more than you might think you need. Its micro-transactional blessings are endlessly rewarding. The further one travels from the vending machine deity, the more delicious and restorative its token bounties become – such was our naturalist cyber-theology.

As it was our first day on the road, there was still so much we had not learned about the subtle and dangerous daru, the first of the trickster kami to intervene in our pilgrimage. The official guidebook imparts fundamental pieces of folk wisdom about this creature: “...local legend recommends never eating all of your lunch, as it is best to have some extra nourishment to fight off fatigue-inducing daru.”³⁰ We did not see this warning until the third day on the trail, which is unfortunate, because the daru struck on our first day, as we walked from Takijiri-oji to Tsugizakura-oji.

We had blithely purchased water at the vending machine shrines a few hours into our journey, at Takahara Kiri-nosoto. Here, we also encountered a different drink spirit. The residents of this oasis had left a metal basin filled with iced cans of *ume* (plum) juice

on the side of the road. For each drink, they asked for 100 yen, which was to be placed in the basket next to the basin. We procured two of these small drinks before setting off into the woods ahead. What fools we were to expect our allies, the machines that vend, to accompany us the entire way that day.

Hours later – how long remains unknown, as time dilates with thirst and fatigue – a bolt of anxiety struck. Though the scenery remained beautiful and the weather was fair, I was transported into a hell realm. I had been here once before, while summer-trekking the Via Tolosana “swamp passage” of the Camino de Santiago that runs across southwestern France. The symptomatology was the same: dehydration, overheating, exhaustion, and the certainty that doom awaits beyond the next corner. Each step brings despair and confusion. Despite undergoing the experience of death and rebirth – on a persistent loop for the last few millennia – I had forgotten all I’d ever learned, and was thus left as a frightened child, alone in the dark. With three quick respirations, I fixed my mind on the present. Then came the words of power spoken by our Order’s elder member, Big Chief John Sinclair: *Relax, things will be all right... Or they won’t.*

The spiritual vertigo subsided. I recentered. Everything was all right, aside from dwindling supplies. I thought wistfully of the vending machines we had left so full. The plum juice provided much needed sugar and quenching, but doom continued to cast its shadow. We then came upon a placard describing a pilgrim who died of hunger on this part of the trail. “Let’s not read that,” said my companion, and we hurried past, careful not to tempt the hungry ghost that haunted this malevolent pawasupotto.

Death can be avoided, until it can’t, I thought. All of a sudden, the death/rebirth process sounded like unnecessary intellectual horseshit. Worse: it was unnecessary intellectual horseshit that had spoiled what would have otherwise been a peaceful nature hike. *Where are the eco-tourists when you need them?* Their snowcrash gospel of flatland naturalism is the ultimate tranquilizer.

Still, the daru were not done with us. We felt light-headed, tired. Our bags seemed filled with stones, and I cursed the heavy jacket that felt so unnecessary even as the cypress trees filtered out the sun. The trail continued – eternally uphill, or so it seemed – and all conversation ground to a halt. We moved on as best we could, each thinking private thoughts.

Eventually the daru were driven away – though not through our own wit or cunning. We arrived at a Michi-no-eki rest area, home to half a dozen vendor gods! We rejoiced, sang a drinking song, and glugged deeply from their stocks: two, four, six bottles consumed in rapid succession. The daru left us then, seeking another host.

At the little shop at the Michi-no-eki we purchased neck towels emblazoned with the image of a nearby abstract sculpture of a humanoid figure astride two bulls. Henceforth they served as portable amulets against the daru. Recall Douglas Adams' advice for galaxy hitchhikers: "...any man who can hitch the length and breadth of the galaxy, rough it, slum it, struggle against terrible odds, win through, and still knows where his towel is, is clearly a man to be reckoned with."

Bells Tinkle

I also picked up a small bell shaped like the head of a *kitsune*, the much-loved (and often feared) shapeshifting fox-like yokai. Music of all sorts, whether emanating from tinkling bells or lusty lungs, is a highly effective means of banishing terror while on pilgrimage. Indeed, members of our pilgrimage confraternity are taught four songs upon their initiation, which respectively address walking, bathing, eating, and sleeping. The elder members of our Order have memorized entire songbooks, allowing them to dispel nearly any psychic crisis.

We recognized a variation on this musical intervention in the use of walking bells. Their gentle tinkle-tinkle can be heard from almost every direction on particularly busy portions of the trail. The majority of people did not wear them for divine protection, but rather as a means of alerting bears to their presence. Yet, a few older pilgrims explained that such beautiful sounds delight the kami, who will in turn follow and protect them on their journey. Other pilgrims referred to them as "disaster-averting bells" – whether the bells jangled when disaster was near, or tinkled to ward it off, remained unclear.

Prisoners of St. James

According to UNESCO, the Kumano Kodo and the Camino de Santiago are siblings. Therefore, it is reasonable to presume that St.

James is related to the kami, if not a kami himself. Relations notwithstanding, a small portion of those who cross the threshold seeking these gods ultimately become their willing prisoners.

An innkeeper, his wife, and two goats hosted us in Tsugizakura, our destination that day. Given pride of place in their living room was the Compostela, the official, ornate document testifying to their completion of the Camino de Santiago. We shared that we, too, had made this journey, and the innkeeper's warm welcome grew even more intimate, even conspiratorial. He poured us glass after glass of *umeshu* (homemade plum wine), and his wife – otherwise so shy! – joined us in devouring the garlic mushrooms and tender bites of chicken she had prepared. Under the cover of flickering candle light, we took turns explaining how we became joyful prisoners of St. James.

Their tale is familiar to all members of our confraternity. Immediately following their journey on the Camino, both members of this duprass fell into deep depressions. Insomnia, phantom pains, and general irritability followed. They could not even make it through the day at their former jobs without developing intense headaches. Driven to the breaking point, they turned to St. James for salvation. Seeking his response, they quit their ordinary lives once more so as to trek the most challenging of all Camino trails, the Via Primitivo. They never returned to their prosperous but now-miserable lives in Tokyo. Instead, they sold their possessions, scouted out farmland in the bosom of the Kumano mountains, and, alongside a couple of goats and plum tree saplings, settled into new lives as permanent pilgrims.

The cult of St. James has legions of devotees not unlike our hosts. Channeling their fanaticism into volunteerism, many devotees become *hospitaleros*. These cultists have given up on the oppressive myth of secularism to live on the pilgrimage route, working as convivial innkeepers, pious bartenders, or rustic chefs. Such true believers will say that, after they returned from their pilgrimage, the road called out to them. Visiting them in their sleep, the voices of the Camino drove these poor souls to weep for their natural lover god. Having bathed in the river of psychic energy that flows out from the bone-relics of St. James, the *hospitaleros* sacrificed their lives as ordinary citizens in order to grow gills. And having mutated, these cultists swam across the cosmic vault of heaven. They now live on planet Jacobius, or Kumano, a similar

godstar.

The desire to move beyond the terrestrial plane is encoded in the name Santiago de Compostela, which translates into English as “St. James of the Milky Way,” or more literally “St. Iago of the field of stars.” The fact that this celestial spiral droops directly above the Camino has led to a popular, if not heterodox, interpretation of how the St. James pilgrimage originated. Instead of rehearsing the well-worn story of Zebedee’s son of thunder, I need only draw attention to the fact that the pilgrimage was established after the forest hermit, Pelayo, followed a mysterious light in the sky to the hidden bodily remains of Jesus’ disciple, James, who had fled the Holy Land for the upper Iberian peninsula in the first decade of the Common Era. Those in the cult of St. James are bound to creatures of light (be they angels or extraterrestrials), just like Pelayo.

The psychological drive to live as a permanent pilgrim has been observed cross-culturally. In the West, it is pathologized as “pilgrimage addiction” and “pilgrimage illness.” The example of the *kashivasi* of India, on the other hand, suggest that some cultures celebrate the decision to become a permanent pilgrim. The term refers to the men and women who undergo an instant and irrevocable transformation into a fulltime holy wanderer while visiting India’s spiritual center, Kashi (more popularly known as Varanasi).

Our hosts in Tsugizakura were touched by the same fanaticism that possesses us and those of our confraternity. Those who suffer from this divine affliction have embraced the waking dream of being forever on the path, walking with, near, alongside St. James, the kami, the light, the darkness. That night, our Order initiated two new members, and, for the curious, their house can be identified by the O.S.G.H. sticker placed in the front entrance window.

Full of food and plum wine, we all knew it was time to retire for the evening – we were drained from our first encounter with the daru, not to mention the normal travails of the road, as our soft city bodies were shocked back into pilgrim form. Before we left our hosts, however, we asked them to join us in a round of *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*. I lit incense of balsam, the pine resin of conifer trees that coated the air in a fragrant thickness. Our hosts removed a slim volume from the bookshelf in their sitting room – Lafcadio Hearn’s *Kwaidan*, an English retelling of some of Japan’s

most famous weird tales. That night, they retold the story of Mini Nashi for us; and here we are retelling it yet again – like shrines, great stories gain power in each iteration.

On the Dangers of New Inns

Curses are ambivalent. Let us leave aside the obvious harm they inflict, so as to consider all of the fairy tales chronicling the journey to lift a curse upon an exile king. The curse signifies that an extra dimension has been added to the metaphysical flatland of human existence. According to our host at Tsugizakura, the cursed town of Dan-no-ura is situated in its own separate time zone of occult causality.

Dan-no-ura is the final resting place of the once mighty Taira, vanquished by the even more mighty Minamoto clan. As recounted in *Heike Monogatari*, the death of the Taira imperial line was a cosmic event (notably preceded by omens observed by the eldest son of the Taira clan patriarch, Taira no Kiyomori, while pilgrimaging along the Kumano Kodo). The shakeup went all the way through the hierarchy of celestial management, as it was not simply the former imperial family that was drowned at sea, but also their ancestral gods.

Our story begins with a blind storyteller named Mini, who has been summoned to a luxurious inn in order to perform the saga of the Taira clan. All he knows about his patron is that he must be very wealthy, and so Mini pulls out all the stops to impress this beneficent figure. Giving the performance of his life, Mini's spirited recreation of the final days of the imperial clan moves his audience from the heights of ecstasy to the pits of despair and back again. It is all very exciting for Mini, even though, as the evening progresses, he has the nagging sensation that something isn't quite right. For one, he does not recall there being any luxurious inn in Dan-no-ura, despite living there his entire life. Perhaps you can already guess the narrative twist – as it turns out, Mini's audience consisted of none other than the ghosts of the Taira clan.

We responded to this exciting conclusion with appropriate gasps and shivers, our senses heightened by camaraderie and what can only be described as the “magic” of storytelling, however cliché that phrase may be. But as my companion and I made our way up the stairs to our futons, we discussed another interesting fact that

this story revealed: ghosts travel. The Taira clan still trek the holy road, just as they did in life. If it were not for his blindness, Mini may have seen his hosts as *hitodama*, disembodied souls that wander the land, leaving a tantalizing trail of new supernatural and weird tales for the Lafcadio Hearn of the future.

Tucked into my futon, sniffing a private stash of leftover balsam incense, I wonder whether the point of storytelling is to excite, or to stimulate the imaginative faculties of the listeners. Dedicating the hyakumonogatari kaidankai to Susano-o, the god of all that is forgotten, has been my way of exploiting storytelling as a method for opening the “mind’s eye.” Why not just enjoy the exhaustion, sore feet, and boredom afforded by the Kumano Kodo? Why all of this cosmological effrontery about a dead god? I had fallen into my own trap by insisting that pilgrimage is everything except anecdotes backlit by insignificant circumstances. Before sleep, I flipped to the front of my notebook where I had transcribed the opening lines of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* . Summarizing his celebrated career as anthropology’s most intrepid scholar, the professor emeritus opened the book by declaring, “I hate traveling and explorers.”

Dreaming at Tsugizakura

It is late now, and snoozes echo throughout the farmhouse. Zonked again, here is what I saw:

A small mouse hurries across the tatami flooring. From my feet, it skitters to my ear. We are chatting, friendly. At first it seems to be offering me a bargain on an expensive, luxury dream, but then the mouse explains that she is here to form a partnership with me. It was then I noticed that the rodent, which initially appeared to be the average size of a mouse, had grown to the size of an adult human. Moreover, she now looked like a busty anthropomorphic cartoon animal. Flattered as I was, I did not accept her offer – whatever that may have been. Later, a huddle of Cumulonimbus clouds – evidently my close confidants – informed me that it is unwise to broker any dream deal on the first

night of a journey. They added that this was all the more true for sexy shapeshifting nightspirits who approach unsolicited.

After that I woke up, wrote down this dream, and fell back asleep. Zzzzzzzzzz.

Symptoms

My companion spent the night pursuing a dreamland tryst with a voluptuous metaphysical furry. How lucky, because meanwhile, I lay in my futon cataloging my symptoms, staring up at the immobile ceiling fan. Upset stomach. Tight chest. Sore throat. Insomnia. Night sweats. Restlessness. Malaise. Jetlag, corona, infosickness? Yes, no, yes. I vowed not to dial up any more news reports during this pilgrimage; I had to silence the cawing of those calamity wind-ups; the news is bad everywhere, and that is all there is to it.

So, to avoid further infopoisoning, I took up pen and paper, and wrote the following:

Our bodies are fragile, hearty things. Though likening them to machines feels, to me, like an overly simplistic simile, it is true that they are replete with processes and back-and-forths that we rarely notice. Perhaps I would take a more charitable view of this perspective if we thought of the machine metaphor in a more Cartesian sense, as a finely-tuned, interconnected system that gestures to the sublime. In medieval Latin, *machina* referred not to dynamism and productivity, but to stability – it was the word used to describe the scaffolding erected for constructing cathedrals, for example, or the solid, powerful war “machines” developed by Italians and Arabs. With the arrival of the clockwork mechanism, however, the “machine” became associated with the delicate balance of the timepiece, which worked not because of an external power but through an internal arrangement that, for some, rivalled God’s own greatest creation – man.

Clocks run until they don't, just like bodies; but unlike bodies, clocks do not sweat and cough and otherwise proclaim their distress. We are wonderful things, in our bodies, shitting, eating, lovemaking. How permeable we are, in spite of the perpetuation of the myth that we are closed off, sealed, hermetic. This is human sociality, too, a desire to touch and be touched. Though he probably wasn't the first to notice, Freud drew our attention to the pleasure (or 'perversion,' so-called) of putting the convex into the concave, of exploring the interior through the exterior. This permeability is, of course, not only for pleasureperversion – it is our strength and our weakness. Masks, gloves, even hand sanitizers – all of these are prophylactics, prosthetics, closing, temporarily, our open selves. Corona-chan has made this necessary, but it is still uncanny, unnatural. We are not meant to be smooth and impenetrable. We are meant to flow.

I fell back into an uneasy sleep. I dreamed, a dream of a plague, shifting and uncertain moral positions washing over me.

Tsugizakura to Yunomine

Distance traveled: 3 kilometers (walking, Tsugizakura to Kobirioji); 11.2 kilometers (bus, Kobiri-oji to Hosshinmon-oji); 6.8 kilometers (walking, Hosshinmon-oji to Hongu Taisha) – elevation gain ~1260, elevation loss ~850; 2.2 kilometers (walking, Hongu Taisha to Yunomine) – elevation gain ~250, elevation loss ~190

Foods consumed: eggs, toast, orange slices; bento boxes (onigiri, karaage, tamagoyaki, banana); instant curry; rice

Drinks slurped: orange juice; Royal milk tea; Boss coffee; water; Pocari Sweat; Aquarius; Kodo beer

Panic attacks: 0

Shit blasts: 1

Sock changes: 0

Surrenders: 0

The weight that had been sitting on my chest departed by daybreak. That morning, my companion and I scoured the map over breakfast to see what this day's route would bring. Tsugizakura was a remote hamlet, and the nearest grocery store (and even the nearest vending machine) was several kilometers in the opposite direction. Though our hosts had prepared us an ornate bento box, we did not have sufficient water to make the next leg of the journey to Hosshinmon-oji.

With the laughter of the daru echoing in the morning air, we decided to temporarily skip over this portion of the trail. We would return to walk from Tsugizakura to Hosshinmon-oji a few days later, when we were outfitted with the necessary provisions and experience.

So, we walked a few kilometers to Kobiri-oji, and caught a bus directly to Hosshinmon-oji. At the temple, we prayed, burned incense, and – more importantly, at that juncture – attended to the holy vending machines. Afterwards, we set out from Hosshinmon-oji to the land of hot springs, Yunomine.

Tiny Glimpses

The forest path leading out from Hosshinmon-oji overflows with an intimate kind of divine splendor. An elegant toadstool, no more than a few centimeters tall, stands proud in front of a mossy branch protruding perpendicular to the rocky hewn wall. It emerges from the soft neo-green of a bemused rock. A perfect tableau, caught in a rare moment where my eyes wandered from feet-on-path to their environs.

The impossibly tall cypress trees create a screen enveloping us. I notice them, even as I must keep eyes on feet, picking out a path on the narrow ledges, rocky ways, and emergent roots. I said to my companion, early on, that I imagine these trees will appear in dreams and mind-wanderings, slender sentinels breaking the light into shadows.

Pink and purple emerge from the brown-green of the mountains. The purple appears as tiny pinpricks, orchid-like flowers no bigger than my thumbnail; elsewhere, the pink- white of sakura petals explodes into view. An obscenely yellow butterfly leads the way for a hundred meters before turning back to greet other pilgrims. Like a tapestry, all greens and golds, with *mille fleurs* popping up as if sprinkled from a great height. The occasional deep red of a flowering camellia tree.

During the pilgrimage boom of the Muromachi period (1336-1573), there was a popular expression about the Kodo: *Ari-no-Kumano Mode*. Translated as “procession of pilgrims as ants,” this metaphor evokes the insignificance of humanity. Even with thousands of pilgrims traversing its trails, the Kumano Kodo was always so much grander, vaster than those who followed it. Ants with their own worlds, mounds to build, food to find – but the Kumano mountains remain a great, sleepy creature. Or, rather, it seems docile to us, as its temporality is unfathomable to our own. The thousand years of pilgrimage are a minute in its time. Can there be sympathy between beings who do not share a common timeline, whose experiences of growth and decay differ by untold magnitudes? Yes, I think; just as we exchange love with cats, trees, and amulets. Perhaps that is the true, unmistakable power of materialism, or so-called animism – an ability to hold dear, to get to know, creatures across ages and experiences of time.

Hongu Taisha

Just after mid-day, we arrive at a side entrance of Hongu Taisha, the first of the three Grand Shrines of the Kumano Sanzan. We approached from a torii gate in the rear parking lot, and carefully avoided the wide, long staircase up to the shrine's main gate. By swiftly passing through a side exit on the opposite side of the shrine complex, we were unnoticed by the deities housed here, whose eyes are fixed on the extravagantly ornate stairway leading up to the main entrance. Our furtiveness was practical. We had not worked up the spiritual power necessary to commune with the Grand Kami of Hongu Taisha; or at least that is what I told myself, as we spirited ourselves past this pawasupotto.

We walked across the highway to Hongu's famous torii gate – the largest in Japan. I ruminated on this concrete monstrosity. Perhaps structures such as this are fourdimensional analogues of even greater structures that exist in the fifth dimension. Clouds gathered overhead. We still had to make it to the promised land, Yunomine, and the passage would require what remained of my concentration, which had been leaking throughout the day. Yet, I could not get Hongu Taisha out of my mind. So, I continued to ruminate, and this is what I thought:

The ancient gods of Shinto await you in Kumano! The doors of the Buddhist temple are open – tourists are especially welcome! This is UNESCO's ideology of "universal value." But where does the universal value of the Kumano end and Shinto priestcraft begin? Appropriating a nativist belief system like Shinto is impossible. And since our ancestors are not kami, their ritual veneration will most likely be empty gestures. Of course, there are exceptions.

Kami are free to do as they please, and are known to make night visits to outsiders of exceptional beauty. This is hinted at by the author of the official Kumano Kodo guidebook, Brad Towle, who describes the pilgrimage route as “copulating with the universe.”³¹ Stepping beyond the author’s euphemistic references to cosmic sex – and warnings to “be careful, the universe might try to make some moves on you!” – it should be clear that dreamsex with a god or gods can be both greatly satisfying, and a dangerous adventure. Children can be born of these holy unions, and customarily they are destined to be either great heroes or murderous demons (though the distinction between these is often a matter of perspective). The official Kodo tourist literature only hints at the fact that the whole point of daily ablution rituals, poetry compositions, and impromptu fertility rites is to absorb the excess energy unleashed by pilgrimage. If not absorbed, this mana attracts *yurei* (dead souls), who induce sickness, infections, injuries, and listlessness.

The Dainichi-goe to Yunomine

The walking distance between Hongu Taisha and Yunomine is roughly 4.2 kilometers. Though this is not a long distance, the trail, called Dainichi-goe, is notoriously difficult. The hike up Mt. Dainichi begins with a stone staircase located behind the gigantic torii gate in Hongu. The steps are made of irregularly shaped stones, which are crumbling, immediate, and jagged. Chipped out of the mountain wall, the steps lead past an intermittent set of private homesteads, where cats snooze on decaying fenceposts as their canine sentinels yip, sniff, and yowl at passersby. We threaded our way around these mountain-houses – then, suddenly, Watch out! A staircase switchback that appears only once already underfoot. We left the houses behind us, and they eventually disappeared under sheets of fog. According to the signage, an especially poisonous breed of viper inhabits this mountainous path, too.

It is a curious thing to be walking uphill, acutely aware of your breathing, the work of your lungs, during a pandemic that attacks these same vital organs. These hills were fodder for a walking meditation, an active look at the body’s special powers – powers that are human, though at times we think of them as superhuman.

A young man in a roomy motorcycle jacket started up the

Dainichi-goe path before us, his hands nonchalantly in his pockets. We followed him for about fifteen minutes. Suddenly, he turned back, passing us on his way down. Was this an impromptu jaunt? An exploratory outing? A mistake? Secret wisdom? We, however, had to press on, one eye always on the grey skies. Rain had been forecast but we hoped it would hold – though I could not think about it much, as I had to concentrate on placing my feet amid the roots and stones and man-made stairs, choosing the least treacherous positions as I pressed on.

My companion had, early on the first day, passed on a valuable piece of trekking wisdom. Take small, slow, short steps when the trail gets tough. Micro-movements recenter the heart. Such self-observation is the essence of “mindfulness.” I practiced this methodology here.

Occasionally, I had the mental space to appreciate the “elven stairs,” natural steps created by large, exposed tree roots clinging to the mountainside. It was green and damp, still but lyrical; an occasional bird, a lonely frog, the random creaking of a cypress tree. Time loses meaning on an uphill climb, as does distance. There is, there only can be, up.

And so the climb up the Dainichi-goe continued. I remember sections of the path in rough chronology. I remember, too, my body’s struggles, though, as is often the case, the memory of pain is fading.

Green, green, brown, green. I wish I could describe the world around me, but I am waiting for it to appear in dreams. Green, green, green. The textures of green, endless. The shades, innumerable. Browns and greys. I saw my feet a hundred thousand times.

How to describe the solitary creaking of the cypress trees? Somehow those little noises were both comforting and frightening, unsettling yet familiar. The trees were speaking in a register I could hear, though not understand. This is both delightful and terrifying.

Desert Nightshade

Halfway up the Dainichi-goe, we found Tsukimigaoka-jinja. With tree roots poking up through its wooden floors, this dilapidated shrine has been reclaimed by the forest, making it all the more auspicious. The Shugendo monks of old were the first to recognize

the mana swirling around this grove of oldgrowth cypress trees, which are now many centuries old. We entered into the mindspace of this forest shrine, which emitted a dizzying array of sacred geometries. Exhausted by the ascent, and jangled by the transmissions, I jotted these notes:

All must enter the gates through the desert. This is not a physical desert, but the wasteland frontier of chaos. It is the orgone-zapping panic-terror of atypical cognitive change. The dark bounty of nature is both a blessing and a curse. Initiation into the cult of kami is soul-craft, which is always accompanied by acute anxiety. How else could we mortals respond to the terrible awesomeness of the gods? In this extraordinary place, freakouts are the only appropriate response.

Writing this passage had a much-needed palliative effect, as my thoughts were becoming more incoherent. Roughly forty minutes later, we reached Hanakake jizo, the “broken-nose bodhisattva” carved into the mountain wall located atop the miniature mountain separating Hongu Taisha from Yunomine. We accepted the picturesque view and cool breeze as an invitation to stay for a short visit with Hanakake, which we channeled with a short session of automatic writing. Here is what I wrote:

All Danger is oceanic. Twomoons day, sniffing smoke hymns while talk of the void slips into the population. All around is marvelous plantlife, almost threatening in its purpose, speaking to the loneliness of animal companionship. Forgiveness is an acorn buried until next winter. The Golden Venom that shatters time is distilled from a furnace so vast it is a sky unto itself.

The Ages are turning back into gold; we have forgotten the name of our King, though all of our Queens have been memorialized in flower names and exotic perfumes. Luminous bathing bodies, naked among the groves, carry the smell of conifer liquor. The monastery of Nature, Brother Moose,

lusty as church bells. The creatures lose their form as they melt into the brush, the honeycomb God that uses the atmosphere as an aqualung.

As we finally picked our way down the steep slope of the Dainichigoe, Yunomine appeared shrouded in a magical mist. I knew, of course, that this was the condensation rising from the numerous sulfurous hot springs that burst through the earth – but pilgrimage is an alchemical operation, and so I saw not just rising steam, but an elemental gateway to another world. We pierced the misty veil, arriving in this hidden Avalon.

We have long been amateurs of hot springs. Deriving from the Latin *amorem*, meaning “love,” amateurs adore the objects of our affections without the compulsion to gain anything. Indeed, one mythic origin for our Order involves a cold March night spent next to a remote, geothermal bath in the southeastern tip of Iceland. We located this hot spring by following an oversized topographical map annotated according to the advice offered by the patrons of Reykjavik’s pubs, our various hosts, and other thermal spring enthusiasts. This map now rests in the Order treasury, largely forgotten.

But I digress. Returning to the plot of this story, the ancient hot pool oasis, Yunomine, now lay before us.

Onsens and Onsen Eggs

At the heart of the town are a cluster of buildings arranged around the main road, the artery by which tourists and pilgrims alike arrive and depart by bus. Across from the bus stop stands the town’s only shop, a combination grocery and gift shop with local crafts and an erratic selection of instant noodles, seasonal fruit, and – most curiously – little mesh bags of fresh eggs. To discover the purpose of these bags, we followed the plumes of heavy steam outside, along the main road towards Toko-ji, a diminutive but ornate Buddhist temple.

In the shadow of Toko-ji temple, a lively river burbles forth into a series of smelly hot springs. We descended the stairs along the side of the temple entrance, and found children squatting next to the river bank, splashing their feet as their parents milled about. The adults were holding the yellow mesh bags containing three or

five or seven eggs. Further down the embankment is a fenced-off area. Inside the fence is a square-shaped hole leading into the steaming water. Little hooks line the hole, which we quickly learned were pegs on which to hang your bagged eggs. Allow the eggs to sit in the water for 10 minutes, then fish them out, and there you have it: onsen eggs, cooked in the beneficent waters of Yunomine.

Onsen eggs are runnier than soft-boiled eggs, the albumen just transitioning from clear to a cloudy white, while the yolk remains liquid. They are not for idle snacking, then, but for topping your breakfast rice porridge or – our favorite – your ramen or curry. Even out of the shell, these liquid eggs retain something of the sulfur stink of the springs, the mineral tang of the waters in which they are cooked – a seasoning that I can't imagine can be replicated once one has left Yunomine. (Yet another reason to stay, indefinitely; water that works to cleanse the body *and* sate the appetite.)

Equipped with eggs and instant ramen, we made our way to our hostel. Here we must break our own strident rules, and include the name of our idyllic inn: J-Hoppers Yunomine. Ideological positions be damned! We are happy to recommend this spot to all pilgrims, though be warned, you might get stuck there.

The hostel was located up a gentle hill, via a path that wound behind the temple and back towards the Dainichi-goe trail. To our surprise, we arrived at a silent inn. Ours were the only shoes stashed in the entryway cubby. From around the corner, we heard the beckonings of the innkeeper, who formally introduced herself as Kumiko. Checking us in, she remarked on the strange quiet that had befallen the town. "Fear over the virus has prevented tourists from both Japan and abroad. We are usually booked up." She continued, "There is a silver lining, though." The inn has three private onsens, which would be totally free for us, and her, to enjoy at any time – day or night.

Sensing a kindred spirit, we then presented our Order credentials and related our keen interest in local history. Leading us to our tatami room on the second floor, Kumiko mentioned how she had absorbed Yunomine lore from her family, who settled in the rural hamlet sometime in the 1970s. It was not until some time later that we learned that her folks were part of the *Zengakuren*, the ultra-left student communist movement that dropped out of society

in order to escape government persecution. Before parting that afternoon, we invited the innkeeper to join us for dinner in a few hours, and she was gracious enough to accept.

Roused from our snoozing by the subtle buzzing of glowbugs outside our window, we found Kumiko in the common room, tending a pot of tea. We took our seats on the tatami, and accepted the porcelain cups of *cha* (green tea) with silent smiles. Waiting for our host to take the first sip, we asked if she was sick of discussing the legend-complexes of Yunomine with tourist-pilgrims. Waving her hand in front of her face, she refused earnestly, explaining how she rarely talks folklore with guests, who are mostly satisfied keeping to themselves. The invitation to dine together may have been a breach of etiquette, but a certain amount of latitude is afforded to those on the outside of traditional social structures – be they pilgrims, gaijin, or both. Tea turned to pitchers of Kumano beer, which washed away our hunger in a cascade of fellowfeeling. To quote an old German adage, “three beers make a schnitzel” (drei Bier sind auch Schnitzel).

Conversations such as ours are delicate. Dominating the conversation places just as much strain on a host as expectant silence. “Perhaps you have heard of Oguri?” she inquired. “Aha! The log cabin emperor pulled to Yunomine on a deathcart, ne?” I replied. Amid giggles, my companion added that “log cabin emperor” was an unusual nickname, perhaps less well-known outside of scholarly circles.

“On the contrary – Oguri has thousands of names,” our host noted, “which is what makes his tales so fascinating. As you may know, the Oguri cycle has been handed down orally since the fourteenth century, with each generation of storytellers adding their own twist to amuse or educate the audience. It’s the never-endingly-told story – though

Yunomine seems to be a genetic part of the tale.”

Like King Conan the Barbarian, Oguri was a warrioraristocrat who made his home in the mountains battling brigands, serpents, and evil wizards, inevitably leading to his fateful coupling with Terute, the proverbial princess-in-exile. At some point in his swashbuckling adventures, Oguri descends to the underworld where the God of Death, Yama, transforms him into a ghou. Upon Oguri’s return to the surface, he is tortured and beaten as an outcast. Regaining consciousness after a brutal night, he awakens in the

back of a wooden cart pulled by a beautiful maiden. She has vowed to collect every infirmed pilgrim she meets on the Kumano Kodo, in fulfillment of a dream vision. Her destination is the mythical onsen Tsuboyu, located in the heart of Yunomine. After she dunks our hero, Oguri, into the thermal waters, his true noble nature is revealed. She stayed by his side, gently washing his limbs. On the third day, his vision returned; on the seventh, he regained the flush of his cheeks. After ten days, his virility returned – much to their mutual satisfaction.

Happily ever after.

Having concluded this tale, our hostess invited us to join her in a bath. We had three onsens to choose from: two were indoor steamy rooms with stone basins of spring water. The third, however, was outside, with a view looking up to the Dainichi-goe trail and the quiet houses that line the foot of this mountainous pass. An overhanging roof sheltered the onsen itself from the elements – by now the threatening clouds we had seen on our walk had turned into steady rain. We quickly stripped, showered, and immersed our aching bodies in the spring's embrace. The rain pattered around us. Our merry trio sipped Kumano beers purchased at a vending machine, watching the clouds dance overhead. To cite another German saying – *Halb besoffen, ist rausgeschmissenes Geld* (Being half drunk is wasted money). Our rosy cheeks glowed in the bright moonlight and soft rain. Avalon, achieved.

Dreamtime Pachinko Machine

My sleep at Yunomine was interrupted.

Moonstruck, I bolted upright, tossed the covers aside, and jotted the following:



The torii gate is a passageway between worlds. Dreaming is humanity's oldest spiritual faculty, which likewise serves as a portal.

Each night, my own private dreamtime pachinko machine. The accumulated experiences of a life minted into coins that are dropped into the slot for a chance to WIN BIG. Across the surfaces of time, metallic balls ping off flippers, shooting into neon

recesses, flickering with emotions, faces, and places that have faded into memory. On the nights at the machine, I repeat the same line over and over again: Come on, Catgirl! Perhaps she serves complimentary drinks at this heavenly casino, even though I suspect she is, in fact, really a shapeshifter.



My mind racing, I knew sleep would elude me for a while. Luckily, I had unfettered access to the most palliative care I could imagine: the inn's private onsens. I slipped downstairs to dip in the outdoor pool, watching the stars peer out from behind the clouds. The forest hummed. A few minutes later, my companion joined me, and we soaked in silence. A hundred poetic words raised to the top of my mind and sank again, unspoken. Sometimes poetry is a silent art.

Ukegawa to Koguchi

Distance traveled: 12.6 kilometers (walking, Ukegawa to Koguchi) – elevation gain ~670, elevation loss ~690

Foods consumed: *karaage*; *ham and cheese sandwiches*; *pepperoni-pizza-flavored chips*; *tangerines*; *onigiri*; *sausages*; *mountain yams*; *grapes*; *tofu*

Drinks slurped: *Royal milk tea*; *Boss coffee*; *water*; *Pocari Sweat*; *Aquarius*; *Ito en Green Tea*; *Sapporo*

Panic attacks: 0

Shit blasts: 2

Sock changes: 0

Surrenders: 1

It was tempting to spend the day in the liquid paradise of JHoppers, eating bowls of rice and hot onsen eggs while soaking in its pools of medicinal waters. The rural hot spring hamlet of Yunomine is roughly 1,800 years old, so, what did it matter if we spent the day, or even a few lifetimes here?

However, we felt compelled to walk the next stretch of the Nakahechi trail, from Ukegawa to Koguchi. This compulsion to move may have been a spiritual failure. We had found a place worth staying, and the opportunity to become other people, and yet, despite all our talk about personal transmutation, we left. Any number of *ex post-facto* excuses could be mustered.

Self-exiled, we took a bus to the Ukegawa trailhead. A few other pilgrims were on the autocoach, as well: a young British man, two middle-aged Japanese women, and a Dutch couple. Though we all got off at the same place, our paths didn't cross again until a few days later – such is the inscrutable nature of the trail.

Arriving at Ukegawa, we set off into the mountains. After no more than a dozen paces, however, our noses detected the unmistakable aroma of fried chicken. Like a spectral finger tickling our nostrils, the fragrance led us to a small wooden shack attached

to the side of a farmhouse positioned along the trail. Peeking my head into the structure, I ventured a polite, *sumimasen* (excuse me), which promptly summoned an elderly woman.

Who knows how long this aproned matron had served hungry pilgrims. We purchased two generous portions of *karaage*, which she placed in a paper bag made translucent by the grease. The smell was talismanic, and served to remind us that the kami adore gay pilgrims, and share in their gastronomical delights. Since they do not have corporeal bodies, para-terrestrials feast on fragrances, which is why temple and shrine-keepers burn luxurious incense. This is also the reason why priests insist worshippers refrain from tobacco smoking, as the noxious smoke attracts *jikikoki* (incense eating goblins). Much was made of this fact in Marilyn Stablein's pamphlet on Hindu pilgrimage, *High in the Himalayas*, and Lafcadio Hearn's "Incense," the most valuable and interesting English-language treatment of sacred aromatics in Japan I have seen.

It was difficult not to scarf down the fried morsels of chicken immediately. Yet, we held off, promising each other that the wait would only increase their tastiness – and we were most certainly right on that count.

The Fifth Dimension

We became lost in a fried chicken reverie until we were roused by an old man waving at us from off in the distance. Apparently, we had left the trail, and he was nice enough to accompany us some ways to the Koguchi trailhead, which pointed straight up. Up again we went, away from another one of the undetected epiphanies that led us elsewhere.

After roughly an hour of silent journeying, my partner remarked, "Pilgrimage seems to fold time," but said no more. My attention tightened. Small houses clustered on the side of the hill; the occasional bark of a dog or crowing of a rooster. The sun rises when our days begin. Rainy mornings, sometimes. The sky above Ukegawa was clear, but moments past, present, and future layered themselves inexorably as I walked. I recalled a similar morning on the Camino de Santiago, though that day had been impossibly rainy. What was it that brought these days together in my mind? Something about the way the trail disappeared around corners, and the curious looks of farm animals and flitting birds. So much silence

lent itself to mental cloudlessness.

Hours of quiet transform a person. Like winning the cosmic-mind lottery, the pilgrim suddenly possesses a fantastic wealth of concentration. Is the everyday world a conspiracy against such unbounded awareness? Who wins when the visions and voices are muted? Intoxicated on pungent flowers; deafening symphonies of birdsong. The squishing of mud underfoot monopolizes my attention. Later, an idea repeats itself on a loop: noble-born rabbits inhabit my family tree.

In the quietude of the Kodo, a new manner of communication arises. There is a word in Japanese for this supernatural silence, *hidoku shizuka* (awful quiet). The shizuka of the Kodo is not an absence, but a presence. The trail is a method, a quest, a ritual working that opens the doors of perception. It is an exit that dynamites the world left behind.

The verdant ravings of nature fertilize the imagination. How can one draw the line between spirit possession, the divine invasion of gnosis, and inspiration? Somewhere I read that madness is a vision of the gods. Religion is terror. Though it is popular to describe oneself as spiritual, such claims should not be readily accepted. Seeing beyond the veil is ruinous, and places people torturously out of step with the world. These sad souls are left to dwell in the non-Euclidean geometry of the angelic spheres.

The forest trail wrapped around the side of Nyoho-san, a mountain known for its gentle slopes. The pilgrim body is in a constant freefall of sensory saturation. A lifetime of ideas lavish the mind in the space of an afternoon. By the time we reach the mountain lookout, Hyakken-gura, I am overwhelmed. My mind is fully open to the beauty of this spot, where pilgrims can see each of the 3,657 mountains of the Kii peninsula, or so historical records claim. Yet, this vista pales in comparison to a realization. These wordpictures flowing in my mind's eye are not ideas at all, but *messages*. The rushing stream of sense-imagery is alive! Possibly, the landscapes of the Kodo are omnidirectional refractions of the kami's own memories of animal ancestors and impossible futures. Possibly not.

But how else to explain the millions of ethereal pilgrims who have, during this leg of the journey, regaled me with stories about screwball diseases? These maladies, they explain, vary according to the season. There was one that I did recognize. *Sundrunk*. I had

experienced it myself, and seen it in my fellow travelers. In the winter, days go by without a hint of sunshine. Then, all of a sudden, brightness illuminates everything in sight. Pilgrims are driven into a frenzy; they frolic, prance, and trot in every direction, as though drunk. In the summer, pilgrims must beware of becoming *sunfucked*, a far more painful ailment.

On this day, we were both sundrunk and something else, which I might call mountain-drunk. The trail linking Ukegawa and Koguchi was the most stunning stretch of the Nakahechi route. Though the initial climb was steep, the forest path then wove its way across densely clustered beech groves that opened onto mountain top summits. Looking over sheer vertical cliffs, these panoramic views gave me the sense of seeing all of the Kumano, Wakayama, Japan, the world at once. We ate our fried chicken in the glow of one such view, sipping Pocari Sweat.

Shifting Worlds

Some time ago, we had arranged to meet members of our confraternity for a picnic on the banks of the Kumano river. Entering Koguchi, we idled in a run-down grocery store where only a third of the shelves were occupied. The selection was eccentric: fresh vegetables, mosquito nets, sparklers. We purchased some of each from an elderly woman, who emerged from the back of the store. Her English was excellent, and she sent us on our way with kind words of encouragement. Now, I imagine that her store is closed temporarily, given Japan's state of emergency and the resultant lack of Kumano pilgrims. After all, "world heritage" depends on the "world" and its ever-shifting, often surprising shifts and quakes, no matter how fixed we try to make "heritage."

Reunited with other order masters, we made camp in a dry riverbed. We feasted on grilled mountain yams, marinated tofu cubes, garlic mushrooms, and an eye-popping array of flavored chips and rice cakes (shrimp! cheese! squid! yakiniku! caramelized onion!), all washed down with plenty of plum wine and hot sake.

As we positioned our blankets in a circle, an affectionate silence fell around us. Lying down with our heads pointed towards the center of the circle, our minds drifted into a single superconsciousness. The ideas flowed even faster now, though they centered on the realization that the corona virus, too, is a yokai. She is Corona-chan. (Here, it is worth noting that the suffix *-chan* is a Japanese diminutive customarily used for cute children, intimate friends, and grandparents). It was unclear whether Corona-chan represented the metaphysical shadow of the virus, or whether the virus was her crossdimensional materialization. Regardless, the pandemic was an inverted fertility rite, dedicated to her.

Like all monsters, yokai evoke the delectable paradox of beautiful fear, attractive mystery, danger and pleasure teetering back and forth. They are monsters only insofar as they are not human, or rather, insofar as they are nonhuman – they are something else entirely. Even to call them "supernatural" is a mischaracterization, as this implies that they are "more than" natural. Why must it be a matter of degree, a linear mapping of human to monster? What is "not natural" about beings that shapeshift and play pranks and appear in all the biomes you can

imagine, showing up in forms as varied as long-necked humanoids and broken umbrellas? Yokai are nature, red in tooth and claw, omnipresent, without order, chaos upwelling.

Agents of chaos, the yokai inhabit all corners of possibility. Corona-chan (batwinged, busty, hair adorned with green virus blobs), meets Amabie (long-haired, fish-bodied, duck-faced). The legendary queen of mermaids, Amabie has long been celebrated along the Wakayama coastline as the oracle of disease. Every year, it is said, She emerges from the ocean spray to prophecy the coming of famine (crop disease) or plague (human disease). It is widely known that Amabie loves to see images of Herself, and protects all who wear Her likeness, depict Her in art, or sing Her songs.

Corona-chan emerges from the bloody markets, Amabie from the turbulent seas of premodern Japanese folklore. Corona-chan fights Ultraman on the streets of Tokyo; Amabie is in Gojira's waters. Amabie's voice carries across the waves: draw me, show me to others, and you will be free from disease. Corona-chan shrieks in reply: kiss! touch! mingle! spread! Elsewhere, the crimson, phallos-nasal *tengu* watch the proceedings from their perches in mountain forests, and the frog-like *kappa* practice sumo moves beneath a layer of pond scum. The supernatural is the supra-ecological. Apocalypse, for yokai, is the chaos of the day, the random encounters with humans only a brief diversion from their rich interweavings and mythologizations.

The parade of yokai appears at random: now on the deserted streets of Osaka, then atop Mt. Hiei, later in snowcapped Hokkaido. Woe to their human witnesses! Just as faeries are said to spirit away the men, women, and children of the Western world, so too do the willful yokai toy with the humans they meet. It means apocalypse for these humans, if we take apocalypse to mean world-ending. None have returned from these encounters, however, so we cannot know if absconding with the yokai is "good" or "bad." It may be both, or neither. The nihilist and famed author of "Rashomon," Ryunosuke Akutagawa, made this point with considerable aplomb in his final novel, *Kappa*, in which a man is spirited away to Kappaland, a mountainous landscape not unlike the Kii peninsula.

When it comes to monsters, many humans prefer the devil they know, as the saying goes. Those who know of yokai know, too, that they are capricious beings, as likely to harm as to help. Perhaps there is something about the pilgrimage trail's apocalyptic

overtones that invite the yokai to stage their parades along its route, their own wild meanderings a distorted mirror of the pilgrim's progress.

A piece of advice: should you see the yokai on parade, there are certain incantations you can recite. Physical objects are excellent talismans, too; jingling bells keep away bears as well as mischievous yokai (especially if the bells are representations of magical creatures themselves, like the hawk-beaked tengu or the elegant kitsune). In Kyoto, I bought a facemask embroidered with a depiction of Amabie. Now, as I move through the world, I am showing her picture, as she demanded.

The Camino has its own theology of amulets, too. Should one see a nighttime procession of figures in white while on St. James' Way, holding bobbing lights, one must run as quickly as possible to one of the roadside crosses and hold on to it, unless they wish to join this eerie band. As we have noted many times, now, pilgrimage launches the pilgrim into unknown lands ruled by unknown and unknowable things. The best the pilgrim can do is watch, and learn, and move gently with respect and cunning, acquiring powerful objects whenever they appear.

A Spectre at Tsuboyu

After this groupmind transmission ended, our compatriots drove us back to Yunomine. They had already been there, soaking in the waters of Tsuboyu while we were trekking to Koguchi – such serendipities are commonplace among coalitions of orderers. Hearing them sing its praises, we decided on a soak before retiring for the evening.

A few meters away from the wooden shack housing the Tsuboyu onsen is a vending machine that sells tickets, which must be exchanged for a number dispensed at an adjacent kiosk. This number (which often reaches into the high thirties by closing time at 9 p.m.) represents the order in which bathers have private access to the onsen. Each ticket permits a twenty-minute dip into the most famous onsen in the world. No guest seemed willing to leave its restorative waters prematurely, which made us all the more excited for our own turn in this holy hot spring.

It was already evening by the time I made my way to the ticket vendor. Considering the hour, I was not entirely surprised

when the vendor handed me a plastic card emblazoned with the number 36. We joined a queue of six other eager onsen-goers sitting outside the wooden structure. Twilight fell around us as we took in the alpine atmosphere of this remote mountain village.

Suddenly, the head of the line caught the signal, and headed down the stairway into the wooden shack that houses Tsuboyu. Only five more people to go! This idea did not come alone. Before I knew it, some mysterious force had drawn me up and over into the town's only *konbini* (convenience store) where I purchased a six-pack of Kumano lager. I brought it back to my place at the end of the line, and hoping to amuse the line-sitters, I cracked a can, took a deep swig, and let out an exaggerated *ahhhh* in refreshment. The others duly accepted the beers I proffered, and performed their own Dionysian salutations. And there began the next round of *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai*.

The woman at the head of the line seemed excited to demonstrate her excellent English skills to us. In her early forties or so, she revealed that she had taught English in the cram schools of Tokyo for fifteen years before deciding to return to Wakayama, where she had grown up. The particular reason for this move still amused her; she had awoken one Sunday in her 6-tatami room near Ueno Park to the thought that it was time to pack it in. A month later, she was on the train to Osaka, and then Kii-Tanabe – a route we had recently taken ourselves. These pleasantries (and beers) exchanged, she started to tell a story.

“Growing up during Heisei [1989-2019], we did not have the same frame of reference as our parents. The stories we enjoyed aired on TV, whereas previous generations had listened to their grandmother's stories or scratchy radio dramas. My mother could never understand why I spent my free time in front of the TV – but the truth was, we were all crazy about the show *Kyoryu Sentai Zyuranger* [this series was later adapted into *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, which aired on American television in the mid-1990s].

“Each Sunday morning, I waited for my older brothers to get up so we could watch the heroes face off against a new monster of the week. Once the show ended, we raced to the river bank to stage our own grand battles. There, my brothers met their friends, and I tagged along, keeping silent so they couldn't notice me until it was too late to send me home again. For some reason, I never told my school friends about these Sunday activities – back then, *tokusatsu*

[science-fiction] dramas were thought of as being only for boys.

“Anyway, these tokusatsu stories were my frame of reference for the supernatural – and they also taught me many important things about life, about kindness, teamwork, and the power of friendship.” She laughed quietly. “It sounds silly, I know – but in many ways I am still using what I learned from these shows. You see, the Sentai rangers each had a specific color, and these colors symbolized different attributes.

“The leader of the group wore red, which symbolized strength, and the second-in-command wore blue, signifying intelligence. When I wasn’t forced by my brothers to play the role of goon #2, I always played as the black ranger, who was good at inventing things. I would gather sticks and mud and make dirt “bombs,” or collect the bottle caps from our sodas as makeshift missiles. It’s important to know how to blend your skills with others, which was illustrated in the way every member of the sentai group was needed to merge and collectively pilot the giant robot they used to fight those giant monsters. It’s like working at a *zaibatsu* [multinational corporation], as the collective effort of all employees is necessary to compete in the world of business. You could say that I continued to play the role of the black ranger when I taught English, as I was always inventing new games and methods for my students – not to mention negotiating the perils of working for a major English-language tutoring company with ties to the *yakuza*... But that’s another story.”

She finished with an apology for monopolizing the conversation, which I felt was unnecessary. Before long, it was her turn for a dip in the restorative onsen. As she disappeared into the thermal steam, the new head of the line lifted himself off the cedar bench. Silently, he walked to the konbini and returned with more beers. Having distributed refreshments to those who were still waiting, he began to tell his tale, which our fellow line-sitters translated for us as follows.

“I have a true supernatural story, which happened when I was around middle school-age and living in rural Fukuoka. It was sometime in the summer, and my mother sent me to the vegetable vendor for more *daikon* [radish], so I was walking along the canal into town, and a realization came over me which made me feel extremely anxious. Though I was walking, I was not moving forward! It is hard to explain, but I tried running as fast as I could,

but the length of the street just continued to stretch out in front of me. It was like time was broken. I tried as hard as I could to break out of this stasis, which made me feel even more panicked, as the road just continued to stretch out even further ahead. Eventually I arrived at the vendor. He asked what had happened to me since I had tears streaming down my face. To my complete shock, he totally understood the experience I described. 'It was like the air took on a density, or thickness that you could not penetrate, ne?' That is exactly what happened!

"According to his explanation, I had encountered a *nurikabe*, a massive invisible creature that pedestrians accidentally walk into and become stuck. Rubbing the stubble on his chin, he elaborated that I was fortunate to have escaped, as some people become forever stuck in the *nurikabe*'s enormous body and must spend the rest of their lives living in slow motion.

Walking home, I was in a daze. The vegetable vendor's matter-of-fact tone was certainly spooky, but I was also dazzled by the realization that creatures of an invisible world were constantly swarming all around us. Even something as prosaic as a passing breeze could be the work of some mysterious phantom! It was not until a few years later that I discovered *Toriyama Sekien's Gazu Hyakki Yagyo* [*The Night Parade of One-Hundred Demons Sketchbook*, 1776], which depicted the swirling spectral world that I had fallen into as a kid. The strangeness of that initial experience has stayed with me all these years. Perhaps children encounter *bakemono* more easily because their minds are more open to new experiences. Who knows, maybe my sense for the fantastic will return as I pass into senility."

With that remark, the line erupted into laughter.

The *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai* continued, with the role of storyteller moving on to the next head of the line after each number was called. Before we knew it, it was 9 p.m., and the ticket vendor came over to tell us, apologetically, that we would not be able to test the waters tonight. We bid goodbye to our friends, purchased a new six-pack and walked back to JHoppers. Tsuboyu would be there tomorrow, and I had to get these stories down in my notebook before they were washed away in the tide of lager.

Laying in my futon, it was only to be expected that I did not know where to start writing. Instead, my notes sketched out what I considered to be a new yokai. This benevolent creature was similar

to the nurikabe, but instead of an invisible wall that prevented individuals from moving forward, it instilled a sense of comradery in groups of strangers. In my notebook, I scribbled the opening to Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, "a spectre is haunting Europe," and added the comment, "perhaps the old curmudgeon was describing this wonderful yokai."

Yokai Dream

Head full of the supernatural and belly full of beer, I slept and dreamt:



On a cliff overlooking a mountain valley, I spied a long trail of unruly monsters marching with evident purpose across an arid, desert terrain. They were on the warpath, which was truly frightening. Above their heads wafted ghastly banners made of human skin and sun-bleached animal carcasses adorned with skulls, antlers, and bones. Their standards were splashed with crimson kanji that I immediately recognized: "Meat Television," "Firecracker Slime," "Carnivorous Water." Floating in and out of dust clouds, these deathhead flags were hitched to motorcycles, pieced together in the scrapyards of hell.

The monster brigade was led by the feminoid mouse with a considerable bust, who was flanked by rotund duckmen carrying tree branches shaped like rifles. The ranks behind them included a bipedal elephant dressed as a cop, Sigmund Freud with cat eyes, a boy prince with an insect crown, Brothers-in-Law broken beer bottles, burning hair, and enraged tea kettles wearing ripped yellow raincoats.

The horde stretched back further than I could see. The monsters were going to war – or at least that is what it looked like. That said, it was also possible that this ghastly collection of ghouls were enacting a pilgrimage of their own. Or perhaps it was both.

This monster mobilization may be a *musha shugyo*, or warrior's pilgrimage. The most recognizable name in the history of *musha shugyo* is, without question, Musashi Miyamoto (1584-1645), whose life has been recounted across numerous media, including Takehiko Inoue's award winning manga *Vagabond*, Hiroshi Inagaki's masterful *Samurai Trilogy* films, and Stan Sakai's *Usagi Yojimbo* comic. These narratives center on a samurai destined to wander the earth gaining allies and defeating evil. Perhaps the desert monster horde has declared war on the disenchanting world, and they are now marching to do battle.

I crept down from the lookout ledge, stowed my binoculars in my pack, and issued a homing beacon to the mother-ship. While traversing the Bardos a few million reincarnations ago, I was picked up by a crew of space-faring tigers who pirated around the hyperverses in a funky spacecraft. They occasionally pick up hitchhikers, and I spent eons adventuring with them. A few lifecycles later, I even brought them back from the dead, but by that time I was a jaded old wizard, and their reanimation meant little. Nonetheless, the captain of the mother-ship, a humanoid tiger, taught me a technique for besting the shapeshifting yokai of the dreamworlds. In her words, "Look behind the mask to see them as playing the infinite game. The carnival of colors is only threatening to the fearful, whereas joy is repaid in joy." Back on the ledge, the pounding of the tomtoms and wardrums vibrated a bossa nova tempo. I snuck a peek and saw that the hulking grotesqueries were not monsters, but decorative wooden floats. The yokai procession was now a dreamtime matsuri with exotic food stalls, fire dancing, and neon sky flowers. A kaleidoscope of wonderful grotesqueries. I spent three lifetimes swimming in those waters.

Yunomine to Hayatama Taisha

Distance traveled: *37 kilometers (by bus, from Yunomine to Shingu)*

Foods consumed: *onsen eggs; rice porridge; udon; fluffy pancakes; bar nuts with tiny dried fish; instant ramen; onsen eggs*

Drinks slurped: *Pocari Sweat; Ito En Green Tea; Boss coffee; Royal Milk Tea; water; Kodo beer; Sapporo*

Panic attacks: *1*

Shit blasts: *1*

Sock changes: *0*

Surrenders: *0*

Today, we will meet Kumano-sansho-Okami, the second god of the Kumano cult. As mentioned earlier, each of Kumano's three grand shrines possesses its own cosmology. However, before we begin to tune our minds into the frequencies of Kumano-sansho-Okami, we have to deal with being hung over.

Luckily, there is perhaps no better place to feel the aftereffects of drink than a town full of onsens. Today we would try our luck again at Tsuboyu, the only thermal pool to be recognized as a pawasupotto by UNESCO. It is the village's primary tourist attraction, and the magical properties of this onsen are exploited by a number of consumer products. There is Tsuboyu tea, rice porridge, ramen, and sake all made with the healing waters of this holy hot tub. Yet, none of these items are as popular as the local ale, Kumano Kodo Beer, which was responsible for our current foggy-headed disposition.

While staying in Varanasi, India, we made a pilgrimage to the Hanuman temple in Hardwar. Every twelve years, upwards of fifteen million pilgrims gather here to bathe in the sacred river Ganges, said to flow into the heavens. This pilgrimage, the Kumbh Mela, is the largest human gathering on earth. On the other side of the planet, and in much smaller numbers, pilgrims also amass at the natural spring enshrined in Lourdes, a rustic township situated in

the foothills of the French Pyrenees. It is believed that the Virgin Mary will heal all who imbibe the waters that pass through her shrine. I recall elaborating a convoluted theology of kami piss before retiring to bed.

Miraculous Restoration

I arrived at Tsuboyu just before sunrise this morning. The previous day we had seen a line seven people long at 5:45 a.m., in anticipation of the ticket office's opening at 6 a.m. As we did not wish to wait two hours for our soak, today I arrived at the vending machine at 5:05 – ICHIBAN! There is no number lower than one. The ticket attendant's kiosk was still shuttered, of course, so I settled down to wait for his arrival.

Did I come for the onsen, or to wait in line? I am waiting in line now, but only waiting to hear a particular bird chirp again. Once it chirps, it's back to waiting for my ticket.

There are a number of rules visitors must observe. Each dip into Tsuboyu is limited to thirty minutes, and only two people are allowed to occupy the thermal spring at the same time. This pawasupotto is a primeval orgone accumulator, so while bathing in its waters is a very solemn affair, it is also extremely erotic.

The Bones of Susano-o

The waters of Tsuboyu cleared our brain fog just in time for a visit to the second grand shrine of Hayatama Taisha. We boarded a bus to Shingu, where we would once again meet Raz & Kaz. The meditative hum of the engine and gentle bumps of the road put us in a somewhat soporific state (perhaps not surprising, considering our early-morning outing), and before we knew it the bus lumbered into Shingu station.

Shingu, the urban center for the southeast Kii peninsula, was always meant to be something other than a far-away node in the Imperial network of power. Up through the Heian period, Shingu flashed in and out of existence as a pirate utopia. This temporary autonomous zone was untethered from any form of stable government until the twelfth century, when an ad hoc navy was assembled by the emperor to raze the city and destroy its motley inhabitants of swashbuckling *wako* (brigands), shamanist cultists, treasure-hunting foreigners, highwaymen, hermits, and *yamabito*

(mountain men): in short, the descendants of Susano-o.

On this day, however, the streets and buildings were mostly empty. The arcaded shopping district contained a bizarre collection of junk shops, clothing stores, and closed restaurants. An American-themed bar with a log-cabin-esque storefront and garish neon signs stood out as much for being open as for its unexpected decor. A group of three young men smoked cigarettes outside, and occasionally one of the young waitresses would pop her head out to tell or hear a joke. We wandered past the shopping area and found the udon shop where we were meeting Raz & Kaz. Over our giant noodle bowls, Raz told us a story about the Kodo he had heard from the old lady who had sold them some venison at the michi-noeki rest stop the previous day. When he told her they were planning on grilling the meat for dinner at their campsite, she ushered them through the beaded curtain behind the counter. In the storeroom, she proffered three small blocks of a white substance, which she told them was *binchotan*.

A product unique to the area, binchotan charcoal is identified by its distinctive white coloration. The shopkeeper told them that its capacity to burn hotter than normal charcoal is said to unlock flavors ordinarily inaccessible to chefs. Though binchotan is usually made from the ubame oak native to Wakayama, the woman explained that counterfeit versions have recently surfaced on the black market. Here, she leaned in conspiratorially, and whispered that this counterfeit binchotan was made from human bones.

This macabre detail brought to mind the Kumano's reputation as the "land of the dead." This nickname is not merely a comment on its inaccessibility. Indeed, the death vibes that hang over the entire pilgrimage stem from the fact that this region has been used as an expansive graveyard since the prehistoric times. Fresh bodies are buried here too.

As the story goes, unmarked cemeteries are often unearthed in the construction projects that criss-cross the Kumano mountains. The fact that these projects are often managed by unscrupulous contracting firms, some of which are controlled by yakuza syndicates, make these finds all the more suspicious. Rumor has it that these syndicates turned a profit on the gravesites they accidentally exhumed, too. Apparently, they collected and sold the exhumed bones to cigarette manufacturers, who used the remains to make charcoal filters, which minimize the harshness of their

smokes. Supposedly, very good filters also remove carcinogenic toxins. We also heard that these bone deposits were pressed into counterfeit charcoal. The elderly lady who related this anecdote, sadly, gave no further instructions on how to discern the real from the fake. Perhaps it was better to stick to udon, for which no charcoal is required.

Monster Riots

With the sun blazing overhead, we escaped Shingu's gravitational pull. How merciful to find that the city was not ringed by an interminable industrial zone. The urban landscape melted away until the pavement gave way to gravel, which loosened into fresh dirt. Soon, we had returned to the green, mountainous bosom of the Kodo – the soothing landscape of our pilgrimage reemerged. Slowly we became unstuck in time, once more.

My thoughts drifted to the regional geo-traumas forgotten to time. Centuries of history were projected into my mind's eye, which I observed as translucent timelines stacked atop one another like animation cells. People merged into one another, then resurfaced from the seething blurs as mutant plant-life, glowing lanterns reflected in water, and grotesque ruins. My imaginative flight was anchored in an anecdote, which I only half remembered.

During the research phase of our pilgrimage, I became enraptured by the “monster riots” that coalesced in the Kii mountains in the spring of 1910. Scholars claim that this uprising determined the fate of the supernatural in Japan, though that seems like an overly ambitious claim for anyone to make. Nonetheless, the yokai riots followed after the Imperial government prohibited the celebration of the nation's native folk beliefs, legends, and myths, along with all other “unauthorized superstitions.” The nation's spiritual power was to be consolidated, completely, in the emperor and his imperial cult. As Figal explains, the motivation behind this legislation was “to redirect the spiritual sentiments of the masses away from heterogeneous complexes of local beliefs in the supernatural and towards a homogenized belief in the unique divinity of the Imperial line, whose ancestors Amaterasu were enshrined at Ise.”³² Overnight, all magicians, fortune tellers, shamans, wizards, and conjuring women became outlaws. Casting spells, exorcisms, and incantations were henceforth punishable by

the law, as per Article 18 of the restructured Meiji criminal code. Though a querulous bunch, these street-level wonderworkers united under the black banners of midnight so as to summon a nightmare alliance of bakemono.

The magic workers of Japan found unexpected allies in the rural farmfolk around Hayatama. In the first decade of the twentieth century, these farmers rose up against the Imperialists in Tokyo to defend their ancestral shrines, as well as the spirits who resided there. The same legislation that outlawed magic-users also mandated the destruction of these shrines, and the relocation of ancestral spirits into *minsha* (consolidation of people's shrines), government-operated religious complexes customarily located in the cities. In one grand maneuver, the process of *jinja seiri* (shrine consolidation) put all local shamans – who customarily tended people's shrines – out of business.

The consolidation of shrines forced the spirits of dead ancestors to migrate away from the families they protected. They were not to be corralled into urban, state-approved complexes. The most intensive resistance to the *jinja seiri* campaign was centered in Wakayama, which suffered the loss of over 84% of its shrines – from 3,700 to 600, as Figal has noted. Only the shrines associated with the recorded history of the Imperial house were preserved. Though defeated on the terrestrial plain of government policy, these displaced spirits, aided by the yokai indigenous to the Kii Peninsula, launched a guerrilla war, which continues to the present day. Monsters are an indestructible force.

Perhaps it was one of the monstrous regiments that I spied in my dream-time vision on the first night. Perhaps the flashes of anxiety I had experienced intermittently on the trail signalled their subtle conquests. Perhaps some part of me had sided with them, and their conspiracy to reconquer the earth. Perhaps we have already surreptitiously taken over.

Gotobiki-iwa

My thoughts moved to the earliest testaments of Japanese culture, as we moved closer to the second grand shrine of the Kumano Sanzan. Like the oldest human narratives on record (*Gilgamesh* being one example), these narratives feature a trip to the underworld. Are we to believe that our oldest ancestors possessed

the means to descend (or ascend, for that matter) into worlds beyond our terrestrial realm? Alternatively, these tales could suggest that otherworldly journeys are somehow hardwired into the human imagination, as a structural feature of cognition. Both possibilities are entertained in this pilgrim record, along with other, less reputable ideas, such as parallel universes.

As mentioned in the introduction, the creator-gods of the universe touched down on earth in Hayatama Taisha, the second grand shrine of the Kumano Kodo. Recall that Izanagi descended into the underworld through a cave not far from Hayatama shrine. The story calls to mind many others: Orpheus's descent to Hades, the hellmouths of medieval Catholicism, not to mention the worldview of the Cook Island aboriginals, who believe that the netherworld can be accessed through a subterranean tunnel. The trope of finding sacred wisdom in dark chambers cannot be dismissed as mere fantasy, as Yulia Ustinova has shown in her study of the atypical neurological effects produced by prolonged isolation in the depths of sensory deprivation chambers.³³ Let the tourists scoff at the otherworldly sojourns of Izanagi; we pilgrims were eager to push beyond our neurological limits, into the mind-boggling timelessness of myth, like witches flying to the Sabbath.

Before heading to Hayatama Taisha, however, we needed to pay our respects to an ancient god housed at Gotobiki-iwa. Visitors here must ascend a mountainous stairway of roughly six hundred steps. A gigantic stone *shintai*, or physical embodiment of the kami, Gotobiki-iwa is inhabited by Kumano-sansho-Okami. In addition to being an elder god, Gotobiki-iwa is also venerated as the site where the three principal gods of the Kumano Sanzan landed on earth.

The climb to the altar of Kumano-sansho-Okami is difficult, as the steps do not proceed evenly upwards – instead, the way forward is composed of large stones piled into rough, uneven layers. The dramatic incline is made all the more perilous by the loose stones that fill in the gaps between the piles, which have a tendency to shift at inopportune moments as one climbs. Halfway up the ascent, I noticed a sign off to the side of the path. After a bootstrap translation, I deciphered the following message: *Do not grab onto others if you lose your balance. You will bring them down with you!*

Schoolchildren in matching yellow hats mounted the incline on carefully placed hands, knees, and feet. A terrified yelp pierced through my day-dreaming, as a young woman had grown afraid and

could not continue the ascent. I was reminded of my own death, and slowed my gait so that I came to imagine each stone step as a soul that has, at the end of its transmigration, finally come to rest in the glory of Gotobikisama. The official guidebook offered two tantalizing

descriptions of this pawasupotto: it is both a vortex of phallic power, and a totem for the frog kingdom, as *gotobiki* translates to “toad” in the ancient dialect of the region. The cult of the ancient sex toad transmits its story through this stairway to heaven, which demands physical exertion as a means of untraining the human muddle-mind and ingrained habits of perceptual convention. The effort necessary in climbing up is a gross symbol for raising the soul so that it is stripped of every attribute.

Kumano-sansho-Okami is not indifferent to our stubborn insistence on seeing the mundane in all things everywhere. Those who lose their nerve halfway up to Gotobiki and return downward, shuddering with vertigo, have glimpsed the awful truth of the cosmos. The panic-terror and loss of equilibrium crashes awareness itself into Gotobiki; anxiety, at its core, discloses the horrible presence of invisible others. It takes roughly 25 minutes of climbing to reach the foot of Gotobiki.

Underneath the god is a flat, paved staging area overlooking Shingu, and my eyes were dazzled by the sun reflecting off distant waves. As is the case with all the grand shrines, I was immediately saddened upon reaching Gotobikiwa. The god speaks so loudly in the vacuum of expectations; up close, the radiation of this god is too potent. The ritual protocols are too programmatic, though I performed them wholeheartedly. Perhaps I am simply too distracted by the day-trippers posing for photos. The wild voices and visions are silenced by the symbolic structures of the pilgrimage industry. As the Turners note, the pilgrim, upon encountering a god, “is increasingly hemmed in by such sacred symbols.”³⁴

The bell atop the hemp rope went clunk, clunk, clunk. Praying in the infinitude of mind-space, I imagined a hole in my heart that swallowed the earth beneath my feet, and then the entire universe, in the silence of quiet darkness.

After visiting the Kumano-sansho-Okami, we relaxed in the temple garden, where we asked Raz & Kaz for a place to stay after our pilgrimage. With the closure of international borders, we had become pandemic refugees. They assented, and we celebrated

together in discrete groves of fruit trees, enjoying the *mikan* (tangerines) Kaz brought as an offering to the Toad god, Tsathoggua.

Looking for yet more energized relaxation, Raz & Kaz guided us to an outdoor onsen. In the dressing room, I put on a yukata and made my way outside. Two steaming pools were set apart from the river by large stones. We talked, lazily, watching birds skim the river's surface for insects. I ran my hands through the hot spring water; *yunohana*, or "hot spring flowers" float past. These wispy white and beige threads are not flowers at all, but formations caused by mineral deposits in the hot spring water. My face flushed, my muscles grew lax, the sun set.

Sacred Sex

Would you like to know a secret? The most ancient esoteric teachings survive in the erotic entertainment of today. In her study of the sex trade during the Heian period of Japanese history, Janet R. Goodwin argued that eroticism was embedded in Shinto religious practices.³⁵ This libidinous praxis shines through the historical records of "mantic" superstitions, folk tales, and magic ceremonies of the Kumano region. As historians such as Goodwin have reported, sexual entertainment in Japan traces its history back to the lineage of shaman cults native to the archipelago. With the coming of State Shintoism, these covens dissolved and reformed in the pleasure districts that emerged on the periphery of major trade centers. Though a vast temporal gap separates the *fujiwara*, or "floating pleasure worlds" of the pre-modern period from the red light districts of today, the transmission of gnosis remains unbroken. (See, for example, the custom of reading birthday horoscopes on *joshi-kosei osanpo* dates.) Submitting oneself to the sexual customs of the road is a way to activate the spiritual power latent within the body. That is the reason we give ourselves over to impromptu fertility rituals when pilgrimaging. Dear reader, I am not sure why I have chosen this spot to come onto you. But I am telling you this right now, here in the apple groves.

The Dreams of Pilgrims

Pilgrims are often visited by unusual dreams. Whether these nocturnal imaginings are born of the superconscious union that

binds walking fellowships together, or not, is inconsequential. The dreams that descend during pilgrimage are sometimes visionary, sometimes prophetic. Yet, our trip to Hayatama Taisha was followed by a vision which seemed over-laden with symbolism that neither I, nor the confraternity, have been able to penetrate. Here are my notations:



Columns of black smoke on the twilight horizons. A beastly roar pierces the sky amidst manifold explosions. An enormous monster is making its way through the Tokyo suburbs of DreamNakano towards DreamShinguku. Jets of liquid fire explode at irregular intervals as the towering creature crushes entire neighborhoods underfoot. Panic breaks loose. Homes, cars, and offices are all abandoned as people flood into the street, only to meet fires raging in an unnatural darkness. Coronachan looms above the metropolis, blocking out the sun.

The research stations positioned on the side of Mt. Fuji broadcast images of the SheGod across the world. Larger than any skyscraper in the city, the humanoid destroyer of humanity stands approximately 393 feet high. Small bat wings protrude from the back of her blood-red *qipao*, patterned with white death-heads. Her cascading black hair is an obsidian nest, styled with two slimy, viral globs. Confusion reigns as the enemy tears across the city.

The Earth Defense Force has mobilized its airforce, which follows the glowing embers left in the giant monsters' smouldering path. Twenty-seven fighter planes fly in formation towards the gigantic terror. They lock their missile onto the target, and unload their payload. There is a fury of explosions. Dozens of direct hits on the monster's body. The beast momentarily disappears in a cascade of burning smoke, as another volley of missiles find their

mark. Suddenly, from out of the oily miasma, a neon blue beam sweeps across the sky. The fighter planes explode on impact. The entire Earth Defense Force air squadron is destroyed in an instant.

The tank battalion, positioned along Higashi Dori, is even less effective. Managing to deploy a first round of cannon-fire, their assault only succeeds in attracting the giant's attention. Once more, Corona-chan's eyes flash and emit a single neon laser that melts the armored tanks, boiling the concrete. Heat waves engulf the apocalyptic wreckage. Corona now stands in the center of DreamShinjuku, the downtown heart of DreamTokyo.

Standing atop Tokyo tower, I lift my universal crystal and am momentarily surrounded by a spiraling white light. The celestial glow solidifies into a solid silver helmet with bug-like orange eyes, and interlocking metal plates cascade down my body to form an armored suit. The ground disappears beneath me as I grow five, ten, fifteen sizes: I have been transformed into Earth's superpowered defender, Ultraman. Now that I too am the size of a mountain, I am ready to confront Corona-chan.

Flexing within my red and grey spandex, I activate the cybersuit's force-field barrier, and form the sacred mudra of the noon's moon, which channels star-energy into my gauntlets. My transformation was just in time, as I am just barely able to deflect Corona-chan's viral saber. Though her strike did not penetrate my shield, the force of the blow knocks me onto my back. The luxury Ginza shopping district now lies in ruins underneath me. Hundreds are buried beneath the rubble, still clutching their Gucci bags with limp hands sporting cracked Cartier watches. From my supine position, I retaliate with a fusillade of cannon fire deployed from the fingertips of my cybersuit. Ten translucent missiles strike the Shebeast, who crashes into the Ariake waste treatment processing center. Great

geysers of foul offal bathe the city, causing a grey-green fog to colonize the city, from the crumbling ruins of the Tokyo Skytree to the eternal silence of the Imperial Palace. My cockpit is bathed in neon red warnings: only two minutes of energy left to defeat Her.

Out of the stinkclouds, I jolt high into the atmosphere and descend with a Rocketbooster Jump Kick! She rolls out of the way in the nick of time, and counters with a claw attack. Her black nails tear a hole in my bodyshield, which flickers and dies. She scoops me into a body slam that sends me into the concrete. The fires have spread to blanket the city. The sakura trees of Yoyogi Park light up in an inferno, flames slicing through the fetid clouds. The power goes out across the archipelago. With the one minute warning flashing, I lose sight of Her. The miasmic conflagration has swallowed the city. From a crouching position, I spring into the air to get a better view. Laughter echoes across the sky, as she whips a Yamanote train across my faceplate. As the train rips across my face, I see the frozen faces of dozens of unlucky travelers, and close my eyes to avoid witnessing their silent screams. Dazed, my suit circuits scrambled, I see her blast a beam of pink light from her third eye that pierces the braincase of my helmet. The cockpit is breached. Her telepathic mind-warping ray blanks out my thoughts.



I am awake in my futon at Yunomine. The TV news is on. The world has closed its borders. All flights are discontinued. The pandemic has gone global. My socks are soaked with sweat. Contagion levels have run into the millions. There is looting in Toronto, Paris is burning, and the Korean media have just announced that the virus has polluted the water table. Viral mutations have produced three new strains that are immeasurably more fatal. The mounting anxiety is unbearable, yet I continue to consume media reports on

an unending loop. Kicking off my blankets, I'm sweating all over now. My forehead is overheating. Nausea. Body-horror. Years of digital addiction have led to cellular mutation. The virus has breached the membrane of the TV screen. I've been infected by the data-stream.

The room is too dark. *Where am I?* This is not where I fell asleep. This is a nightmare. My breathing stops. I have to remember to breathe, but it's difficult and painful. Anxiety attack. The ideas I am having are not my own.

Something is beaming ideas into my head. I imagine black veins running backwards from my optic cavities to my brain, feeding the poison into my central nervous system. Cannot get a breath, as my lungs fill with info-sludge. Though my vision has blurred, my eyes continue to sweep across the news-media. Never blinking, my eyeballs are seared by the data being mainlined into my psyche. There should be a smell. There is no smell. My frantic sniffing yields nothing. There is an alarm going off somewhere in the vast darkness. Focus on it. The alarm grows louder. My senses return, and I realize that I'm still dreaming! The alarm blurs into focus as my cybersuit's 30-second countdown begins. Corona-chan had channeled the collective paranoia of the world into a Psychic Attack.

With my last ounce of strength, I slam my fist on the distress beacon. Bursts of incandescent light flare out of my chest! And then there is only black.

Tsugizakura-oji to Hosshinmon-oji

Distance traveled: *14.2 kilometers (walking, Tsugisazkura-oji to Hosshinmon-oji) – elevation gain ~780, elevation loss ~980.*

Foods consumed: *onsen eggs; rice porridge; onigiri; currypan; ham and cheese sandwiches; grilled-meat-flavored chips; tangerines; green tea and ume soft serve; white bean bun; instant ramen with onsen egg*

Drinks slurped: *Aquarius; Boss coffee; Royal Milk Tea; water; Kodo beer; Sapporo*

Panic attacks: *0*

Shit blasts: *1*

Sock changes: *0*

Surrenders: *0*

Due to a lack of supplies, we skipped the trail between Tsugizakura-oji to Hosshinmon-oji. Today, we walked that segment. In preparation we purchased ample provisions at the store in Yunomine, and boarded a bus that carried us back in time and space, to Tsugizakura.

Faint outlines

The bus dropped us near the elven stairs that we had encountered at the end of our first day. Climbing these verdant steps, we arrived back on the trail that spiraled past the home of our fellow peregrinos and their friendly goats. We did not stop in, though, as yesterday's bus travel and foray into skeletal Shingu made us eager to take up the pilgrim trail once more.

We had been right to skip over this section of the route. The roads were winding and remote. Flooding in recent years had made large parts of the trail impassable, so we followed temporary waymarkers onto makeshift dirtways, which likewise curved around and around. Once we found ourselves walking in a circle along with other pilgrims, including the young British man we had seen a few

days ago on the bus, and two older Japanese women. Is there a yokai who sends you walking in circles? Probably. We eventually broke out of this gravity well, though it cost us our companions. We parted company on an unadorned wooden bridge, leading to a system of skinny ledges roped along the mountain face.

After lunch, we came across a placard indicating a site of significance. We had seen many such signs on our pilgrimage, but this one told a story not of ancient tea houses or ruined shrines, but rather of an upheaval against so-called “progress.” Far removed from roadways and bus routes, this placard revealed that we were standing at the site of a settlement that had been home to a village since the Middle Ages. Its location on the Kumano Kodo meant that this rural enclave prospered and flourished, but by the nineteenth century, many of its younger inhabitants fled for larger cities. After World War II, less than one hundred villagers remained. Then, in the 1950s, the Japanese government attempted to force the inhabitants out by severing all utility services, including water and electricity, to the village. Yet, a handful of villagers continued living there until the 1970s, at which point the last hold-outs died out. The slow death of the township was thereby complete. Passing this hamlet today, one might easily skip this info-placard entirely. All that is left is the rubble of siding and some discarded tires, easily mistaken for recent dumping and not the remains of a once-proud village. Later, two fellow pilgrims noted that descendants of the displaced villagers returned here to conduct secret rites and rituals, honoring the spirits of their ancestors.

This story clashes with the Kumano Kodo’s designation as a “world heritage” site. It demonstrates that it is the government who decides what counts as “heritage.” After all, “world heritage” is a recent creation, a conceptual sleight-of-hand intended to perpetuate the idea of an unbroken line of pilgrims, walking the holy road since time immemorial. The “world heritage” narrative makes the Kumano Kodo appealing to tourists of all kinds. However, this story also hides a much richer, more complicated, and messier set of mores and folkloric traditions, as numerous as the kami inhabiting the winding trails. What is more, it paints a thick, shiny coat over the entirety of the landscape, both real and imagined, smoothing out the crags and snags of the tension between modernity and tradition that still presses against these communities. Luckily, however, one can walk the Kumano and still see the faint outline of

these moments, if one is attentive – that is, if one does not allow the map to become the territory, the “world heritage” to become the only mode of perception. Like the traces left by this ghost town, the traces of the messy, productive reality of the passing of times, lives, and ideas can never be totally obscured.

The unchanging “world heritage” of the Kodo is detached from the history of this locality, which is written in the grammar of catastrophe. The most recent disaster to befall this region occurred in the fall of 2011, when a major typhoon hit the Kii peninsula, flooding entire Kumano townships. Photographs documenting the extent of the damage hang in shops across the Kodo. The beleaguered residents of the area shot these horrifying images themselves, and proved keen to share their stories, provided the opportunity presented itself. This disaster, and the reconstruction projects that followed, has its own oral history, which we recommend to folklorists exhausted by the sanitized master narrative of UNESCO.

Traveling Monastery

We found ourselves again in the company of a few other pilgrims at Jagata jizo, located about halfway between Tsugizakura-oji and Hosshinmon-oji. Famous for attracting daru, this jizo is named after the serpentine shape of the writing (*jagata* translates to “snake-like”) on the stones behind the shrine enclosure. We made sure to exchange pleasantries with the other pilgrims, but there was little in the way of conversation, a marked difference from previous pilgrimages we had taken on. While trekking the Sarria route of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, we traveled alongside a dozen or so fellow pilgrims even though it was the low season, mid-December. On our way through the Via Tolosana in France during the rainy days of late summer, we still found ourselves sleeping in full (albeit small) pilgrim hostels. In our journey along the Kumano Kodo, however, our only constant companion was the Covid-19 pandemic. The handful of pilgrims we encountered tended to maintain their distance.

While the trails were largely empty, shrines were an exception. Japanese pilgrims from all over the country migrated to these pawasupotto every day by the tens of thousands. They made their journey by car or train, or as part of a weekend hike.

With the pandemic, a new ideology had come into being: *Immunofuturism*. This ideology is not a comprehensive philosophy, but a screen, or filter, through which people see the world. At the heart of this worldview is a contradiction. One must behave as though they are already infected, and yet, simultaneously, protect oneself from infection. As a result, the fabric of all interpersonal interactions is now stained with paranoia. Impulsive suspicion has become a reflex. I just heard a sneeze! That old man just coughed! Burn the sick! Abandon the old! Like Hollywood's racialized depiction of savages throwing virgins into the volcano, as featured in *King Kong*, perhaps Corona is a godkami that can be appeased with blood sacrifice.

Immunofuturism is a science fiction story that I am telling myself each day. Like all science fiction, it is a means of organizing the otherwise overwhelming totality of the present.

The relative solitude did not change the fact that our pilgrimage placed us, as Victor Turner describes it, in another context of existence. And so we forged our fellowship from out of the non-human world.

Guardian Waymarkers

The Kumano Kodo is embroidered by subsidiary shrines. These spirithouses were crowded especially tightly along the trail leading up to Hoshinmon-oji. Yet, we were unable to visit the majority of these pawasupottos due to the recent typhoon, which rendered a portion of the Kodo inaccessible. I wonder about the shrines left unattended.

Does the overflow of mana produce mutant insects, small forest gods, or holy wellsprings? This abundance of untapped spiritual energy may explain the distribution of *mycelia luxcoeli*, the iridescent mushrooms native to the Kii Peninsula. For a few days each year, this mysterious fungi, locally known as *tomobishi-dake*, gives off an eerie green glow that illuminates the forest floor. This natural phenomenon is exceptionally rare, which goes some way to explaining why *mycelia lux-coeli* was only discovered in the 1950s. Moreover, they only grow in remote parts of Japan during the heaviest part of the rainy season (in June, usually), and their life cycle lasts for only a few days. During my research into this mushroom, I discovered that the iridescent chemical that produces

the glowing effect is named “luciferin,” a direct reference to Lucifer, the fallen angel and “light-bringer” of Christian theology. This mushroom has many syncretic and supernatural layers.

We followed the winding, mysterious detours to Hoshinmon-oji. We had to pay close attention to the waymarkers, as the trail was far from obvious. A complete inventory of the signage would be impossible, as they are excessively diverse in size, shape, and function. The most common type of subsidiary shrine is the *oji*, a small wooden house laureled with hemp-paper thunderbolts. Inside are a ceremonial bell, flowers, statues, and teetering stone mounds. The term *oji* translates to “prince,” suggesting that the godspirits enshrined in these mounds are the descendants of a bigger, more kingly *kami*. As lesser Powers, *oji kami* are far more receptive to prayer than their older relatives. Accordingly, pilgrims visit as many as possible searching for a guardian who will accompany them to the end of their travels. Certain *oji* have been adopted by prominent pilgrim confraternities, who will serve as shrine custodians, and thereby ensure the favoritism of the shrine’s respective *kami* for generations to come. We followed suit.

There are ninety-nine *oji* between Kyoto and Nachi Taisha, the terminal point of the Kumano Kodo (or so it was said during the Tokugawa period). This truism was meant to symbolize the multitude of small pilgrimage shrines along this portion of the pilgrimage route. Alongside these Shinto roadshrines, there are also stone sculptures depicting the Bodhisatva, *o-Jizo-san*. Often shortened to *jizo*, these icons guide the souls of dead children, who would otherwise be unable to cross over into the afterlife. Under their stone feet are great big bottles of sake and fragmented chips made of porcelain, and various other secret notes to the universe.

As I gazed at a collection of these squat statues, the wind brought me the disembodied voice of Joliphilo, my penpal. Exclaiming his love for the vital “paganism” of Japan, the whisperer reminded me that each of these stones represent a single soul. Women who have had failed pregnancies (whether natural or aborted) knit hats and bibs for these statues each winter, as a comfort to the spirit that failed to incarnate. Before my departure, Joliphilo sent me a letter in which he mentioned that these miniature gravestone monuments were, for him, the most touching part of the Kumano Kodo.

My companion and I paused there, amid this heavenly

multitude. As I picked up my rucksack again to head on, I puzzled over how to offer my gratitude to Joliphilo for this beneficent vision. The answer was obvious: send prayers through the jizo! His spectral visitation flicked the psychic switch, activating the numinous neon coloration of these miniature telepathic stone towers. Before his visitation, they were simply stones; now, however, they were alive. There would be no better way to repay him than praying, burning incense, and making offerings at these conduits. Thereby, our routine of stopping at the jizo began. Before taking up the trail on this particular occasion, I jotted the following in my notebook: *Calling upon the arbiters of the universe sensitizes us to the miraculous. This is how gods are made real.*

The friendly jizo were not the only waymarkers. There is also secular signage, like the placard at the abandoned village. Far more numerous, though, were the wooden signs marking one's position on the trail, which appeared approximately every five hundred meters. These simple guideposts are the plainer cousins of the directional markers found on Spain's Camino, tiny stone chapels standing about a meter high and marked with a ceramic tile (the iconic yellow scallop-shell against a blue background). Their most famous feature, of course, is the arrow indicating the direction of the holy bone reliquary of St. James in the cathedral of Santiago. There is something undignified about the scallop-shelled guideposts and the Kodo signs. Perhaps it is the scrupulousness with which they mark the path. Vandalism, in some form, is common to both. Could this be more than mere iconoclasm? Perhaps it is an outpouring of enthusiasm, a divine eruption, that infuses the inanimate with the living truth of revelation.

Eco-tourism

As we drew closer to Hoshinmon-oji, we were passed by a cheery line of elderly men and women, power-walking the trail. We had seen quite a few of these merry bands of nonpilgrims, presumably people who lived near these restorative mountain paths and knew their twists and turns as well as their own homes.

Their crunching feet retreated behind us. A sudden peal of birdsong erupted from the trees. Listening to this untranslatable music, I was struck by a wild bout of paranoia. Are the birds in on it? What do they know? What secrets hide in their singing, irregular

melodies? Their vocalizations haunted me. My vision narrowed to a pinpoint. I am walking through a soundscape populated not by the natural world, but by songs of death, planetary destruction, and the sublime miracle of universes being recreated. It had been days since I had succumbed to the info-sickness of doomscrolling the pandemic news on my phone, relying instead on the power of nature walking as a form of detox. But re-wiring the flow of dopamine is excruciating. It is impossible to quit anything; we simply cultivate different addictions.

The birds stopped their tunes, and I looked at the solid mountains around me. My info-sickness passed. To assuage my head, I imagined myself playing chess with some wild fungus.

Hongu Taisha, Again

Recall that we carried two sets of pilgrim passports on the trail, one issued for the Kumano bureaucracy and one for our Order. We were eager to fill both with the bright red stamps housed in mini-shrines all along the route, and having completed this final section of the pilgrimage, we returned again to Hongu Taisha.

This time, we entered from the massive staircase in the front. Having obtained a final stamp in the shrine complex, we walked to the Tourist office across the street. Here, a bespectacled administrator scrutinized our Kumano-issued passports. He nodded curtly, and told us to return in fifteen minutes for our certificates. We went outside and got some ice-cream from an old woman shopkeeper. Fifteen minutes passed, but the man did not reappear from his office. And so we spent a few minutes wandering through the sterile exhibition held in the tourist office, watching snippets of videos on repeat and gazing at huge reproductions of paintings printed on glossy room dividers.

It was here that I first saw *Mongaku Shonin under the Waterfall*, by Utagawa Kuniyoshi. In this colored woodblock print, the last great master of the ukiyo-e style captured the otherworldly anxiety that fell upon me over the course of the pilgrimage trail. The image itself features a Shugendo monk meditating underneath Nachi Falls; yet the majority of this vertical triptych is occupied by the rushing waves of falling water destined to crash upon the monk. Located in the bottom right corner of the scroll, the monk is a rather minor component of the composition. To be certain, the thematic focal

point of this woodblock is the ferocious power of this most holy of natural formations. By gazing into the monk's twisted visage, the viewer is offered a face-to-face encounter with the dragon soul that inhabits Nachi Falls.

Even in the alienating atmosphere of the tourist office, this image had a lesson to teach me. Observing the monk's posture, I learned to recognize the daru not as creatures hiding in the brush, but as the belts of muscular tensions that tighten around the neck, shoulders, and chest. Slowly walking my eyes across this woodblock, I attempted to imprint the tableau in my subconscious. The conscious mind can only absorb so much information, so I entrusted this revelatory artwork to a deeper, or sub-liminal area of awareness. I did not have to wait long before *Mongaku Shonin under the Waterfall* revealed more of its secret teachings.

Later that night, as I was laying in my futon preparing for the onset of sleep, the scroll reappeared before my eyes. However, in this hypnagogic state, I was able to enter the picture and become the monk, Mongaku Shonin, under the waterfall. Instantaneously, the full weight of the waterfall fell on my body. The torrenting cascade smashed my skull open, shattered my shoulders, and battered my lifeless body, cleaving the skin from my bones, which eventually floated downstream. Suddenly I was reborn and the horrible ordeal proceeded once again. Again I was reborn, and again. An eternity passed. Then, abruptly, I found myself under the waterfall remembering an eternity spent suffering under the strain of the falling water. At this point, my body did not resist the falling water. My awareness simply noted the immense pressure as it washed over me. Surrendering my neck, shoulders, and entire body, I simply focused on my slow breathing. Having surrendered, the water drew me upwards, where I passed the floating deities, the swirling clouds, and, then, the tops of the Kii mountains. Deep in the sky, there was only darkness.

The practice of surrendering became a nightly ritual for me as the pilgrimage proceeded. This ritual took on a variety of forms, with my imagination reconfiguring it to suit my mood. For example, a particularly enjoyable iteration of this practice involved picturing my body as a giant robot piloted by my conscious awareness. As I prepared to sleep, my awareness would take the elevator all the way down to the sub-basement of the robot feet. Each of the robot's toes was operated by a control panel located in a room no larger

than a broom closet, and my job entailed flicking off the wall-mounted lights switches in each of these rooms. The next floor, where the legs are controlled, is structured as a long hallway lit by halogen tubes hung to the ceiling. The light switch here is a blinking red button at the far end of the hall. I shut that down, and move up my body, turning off the lights. Each floor has its own unique lighting switch, but my favorite was the hydraulic valve system for the knees. To shut the light off here, I had to turn a large steel wheel. Later, after returning home, I learned that mindfulness experts refer to this practice as “body-scanning,” and heartily recommend it to insomniacs. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

My reverie at tourist office in Hongu ended abruptly when the tourist officer called out my name. The man had reemerged from his little office, which he handed over to us with little ceremony. Certificates in hand, we looked at each other. “Pilgrimage complete – officially,” my companion said to me. We shared a smile, as such paperwork has little to do with traveling the divine roadways. The paper is a nice souvenir for remembering the cosmic facts acquired along the way. To be sure, pilgrimage is a perspective; the road never ends.

There is a longstanding debate among scholars of pilgrimage. Some argue that the journey is the core of the pilgrimage, while others argue that this religious enterprise revolves around the holiness of the destination.

Unsurprisingly, those who travel to a site by bus, car, or other outsourced engines deem the final destination as alpha and omega of their endeavor. The preeminence of the journey, on the other hand, is claimed by those who walk, cycle, or otherwise demand that flesh and blood power their progress across great distances. The matter is far from settled, and we are happy to see the virtue of both perspectives – especially if it suits our itinerary.

Here, it is worth reminding the reader that we had already passed through Hongu Taisha earlier in the trip. Perhaps an apology – or better, an explanation of our negligence– is in order. The first time, we entered from the back, picking our way through car parks and shuffling past concealed dumpsters; we shielded our eyes, half in jest, and we hurried on, since technically we shouldn’t be there, as we had not yet completed the pilgrimage. The second visit to Hongu Taisha was no less brief.

Once certified as pilgrims, we returned to the main shrine,

bought some amulets, got some stamps, and beat a massive taiko drum, which is the privilege of all Dual Pilgrims. However, I remember more about the red beans embedded in the fruit popsicle I ate while waiting for our certificates than about any of these fleeting moments. We did not seem to feel the rush and release of accomplishment, of the “ending,” as we entered this shrine – a rush that, it must be said, I had felt before, arriving in the plaza in front of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, where I dropped my bag and stared up, clear-eyed, at its scaffolded front. I had felt such a rush, too, not so far from Hongu Taisha, the moment that the idyllic town of Yunomine slipped into view as we descended the steep slope of the Dainichi-goe. But at Hongu Taisha: well, this was more of an official visit, the bureaucracy of paperwork demanding we use its facilities. For us, after all, the Kumano was not (is not?) over yet, even with our passports fully stamped.

On the outskirts of Hongu, we held our first poetry contest as Dual Pilgrims. Here are some of my verses:

Put dragons, flowers, and lily pads on your teeth.
Each bite returns vitality to the Earth.

-----///-----

When the Dao was lost, men began to speak of
duty;

When love was lost, men spoke of fidelity;

When the belt was lost, men used their neckties to
keep their pants up.

-----///-----

Courage will be forgotten when the Grandfathers
grow old

-----///-----

Every zoom is a zoom for you

-----///-----

Be as ice under the sun

-----///-----

When grilling food know that you do not select the
morsels; rather, you hear them sing

-----///-----

Hot water regenerates the body

-----///-----

Accept loss forever; too much is just enough

-----///-----

The table is set, the feast has begun

We concluded the proceedings by reciting two of our favorite poems from the Edo period:

What a blessing it is to see, on a lotus leaf,
glistening dewdrops, glowing in Amida's light! But
just as we think that, a frog appears, and tells us,
"Oh, that's just drops of my piss!"

- Shokunsanjin (1749-1823)

Even flower petals can move a mountain – if they
are cherry blossoms!

- Sakai Hoitsu (1761-1828)

The Cutmouth Lady

We returned to J-Hoppers for what would be our last night in Yunomine. Nestled under the flannel skirt of the *kotatsu* (a low table with heating lamps underneath) we looked forlornly at the empty room around us. The opposite corner had just been vacated by a Japanese couple scrolling through their phones, and the inn's proprietor had poked her head in to wave goodbye for the evening. We were alone.

The staircase leading to our room above was lined with photos of erstwhile gatherings in this very room – groups of gaijin and Japanese tourists alike, gathered around *kotatsu* littered with empty bowls and sake cups, a fitting end to a long day of soaking in Yunomine's hot springs or trekking the mountain trails. One table was even outfitted with a shallow pit of sand in its middle, above which hung a heavy iron pot – perfect for communal meals of *nabe*. Tonight, though, there was only us. I poked at the last bites of my instant ramen and looked at my companion. Maybe a story would help.

Though we had become accustomed to sharing stories with those we met on the pilgrim trail, the virus had emptied the inn. We had to make our own fun, so we spent many nights reading passages aloud from *Don Quixote*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *Till*

Eulenspiegel, or some other bawdy, tantalizing text. On this night, I sought to retell a half-remembered tale – that of the Cutmouth Lady, one of those stories that inexplicably lodges in the mind.

Though this is a modern Japanese urban legend, the version I knew was itself a retelling, embedded in a story of budding Sapphic desire, taboo, and the erotic allure of the supernatural. Revisiting it that night in the inn at Yunomine, I was struck most particularly by the folkloric protagonist: a woman wearing a surgical mask, well-dressed, stopping passers-by to seek approval. She asked them if she was pretty. If they replied in the affirmative, she would rip off her mask, revealing a gash across her face where the mouth should have been: *am I still pretty?* The Cutmouth Lady horrified and invited in one gesture.

In the version penned by Romy Ashby, this modern-day yokai appears on street corners in Tokyo as well as sleepy fishing villages. She haunts the coffee shops where Ashby herself kissed boys out of expectation rather than desire as an

American Catholic transfer student to Japan in the 1970s. She is lurking behind the naked breasts of classmates, beseeching, *am I pretty?* To be foreign is to understand alienation by necessity. Notoriety and anonymity merge when one is “not from around here” (the peregrinos, the gaijin) – it is a state of pure potential.

Had there been candles, they would have fizzled to oblivion. As it were, the tatami mats only echoed the silence. We caught each other’s eye and slid out from under the table. To sleep and dream.

Yunomine Onsen to Nachi Falls

Distance traveled: *36.5 kilometers (bus, Yunomine onsen to Shingu); 18.8 kilometers (train, Shingu to Nachi, and bus, Nachi Station to Daimonzaka)*

Foods consumed: *onsen eggs; rice porridge; unagi sushi; vegetarian sushi; onigiri; ume and mango soft serve; Shingu ramen; kara age*

Drinks slurped: *milk tea; barley tea; coca-cola; water; Pocari Sweat; beer*

Panic attacks: *0*

Shit blasts: *0*

Sock changes: *0*

Surrenders: *0*

We left Yunomine this morning, our hearts full of sadness. We set out for the final grand shrine at Nachi Falls. We took the bus to Shingu, found a cheap room to rent, and left our bags with a grandmotherly hostess.

Goodbye Yunomine

How to say farewell to a holy place? The trail to Yunomine had been difficult, but we had pressed on, enticed by the promise of returning to the soothing natural baths at any time of day or night. There, our naked bodies soaked the spring waters and sang sparks into the sky. Onsen were used as hospitals through the premodern period of Japanese history, and in keeping with this fact, our long soaks in Tsuboyu took us beyond mere good health. We came to possess a distinct absence of any dis-ease. Even now I struggle to find the words, which convey the opposite of illness.

We dallied longer than expected in Yunomine. Our original plan was to stay for only a few nights, but the allure of this village was irresistible. We were drawn to its thermal pools. From the

second night onwards, it was our base of operations. Night after night, we fell deeper into the joy of returning to our tatami room, bathing in the onsens, eating instant curry and drinking vending machine beers, as the apocalyptic announcements echoed across the televisual spheres.

Yunomine was our island of the lotus eaters, the hot spring waters our lotuses. In late-night onsen revelries, we toyed with the idea of staying here, indefinitely, trading labor for room and board. Each morning we would scrub the sulfur deposits from onsen pools, make rice porridge for fellow pilgrims, peddle eggs by the steaming stream in front of the local shrine. Perhaps we could meld with the landscape, let the world think we had disappeared somewhere along the treacherous Dainichi-goe route, shrunk to the size of lizards and scuttled into the underbrush. In the land beyond Corona, we could trade stories like the merry band of youths in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, on the verdant hills outside of Florence, as the Black Death consumed the city.

Apocalypse always seems to occasion fantasies of pastoral escape, as the mundanity of the lost world becomes rosy, crystalline, sacred, thus meeting, for the first time, the cerulean blue and glittering dreams of a "simpler life" – raising goats, keeping bees, growing squash. If this world is ending, perhaps we can start the old one over, again, and again.

But, in the end, we had to leave Yunomine, our sanctuary, lest by staying we broke it. Or, worse, had to watch it creak and break around us. Apocalypse, like pilgrimage, demands a steady pace – it goes on until it doesn't.

As we boarded the bus to Shingu, I recited a farewell poem to Yunomine:

On the pilgrimage peninsula of the Kii
Mountains
Sake outdoors induces trance
Requisite visions of magnificent figurations
Forest of amulets enduring the indefinite
residency of longevity
Affectionately commissioned by the kami

Mandara

Before making our way to Nachi, the third and final of the grand shrines, we spent some time pouring over a peculiar map: the Nachi Senkei Miya mandala. Though the word *mandala* generally conjures up visions of geometric, boldlycolored compositions from Buddhist traditions, this late sixteenth-century example is something else entirely. It is a translation of a shrine-world landscape. This illuminated map transforms fragmentary experiences – from the loosely connected idea of “days” or “events” or “encounters” – into a woven tapestry of interdependence that we call *pilgrimage*. Under this heading, the morning trip to the vending machines, the emergency roadside shitting, and the instant ramen meals join the realm of newly-discovered elven stairs, sleepy settlements, and ancient mountains, forming, in the process, the image of a journey, dreamt and real.

So-called premodern art is often looked down upon for its “illogical” organization of space. Human figures are depicted in various scales within the same pictorial space – towering gods and minuscule humans, or towering humans and minuscule gods. The same story is shown in multiple moments within the same image – the enticing bather, the creepy peeper, and their inevitable clash, all in one undulating landscape.

Should one seek a photographic imitation of the Kumano’s trails, the Nachi Senkei Miya mandala fails to impress. That is, it will not impress anyone who looks to art to see replicated the perceived world, with rules about time, and perspective, and illusionism firmly in place. But such standards are also themselves failures – failures of imagination, inquiry, and an understanding of the world as so much more than that which our five senses report – a failure, in short, of extrapolation, a self-imposed limit to meaningmaking, a foreclosing of the true potential of the image.

The mandalic view of the Kumano Kodo sets the enormous eternity of the mountains alongside the flatulent joviality of the pilgrims, and the ritual dance of amulet selection. The pilgrimage is itself a living mandala of awesome and awful simultaneity. It is as though all time and space have been collapsed into a single punctum, or concentration point, which features joy in a time of pandemic, fear that breaks into laughter, fatigue that unwinds in hot springs, friendship peeling like a shrine bell. In this book, we are laying out tiny moments for your viewing pleasure, like the nuns pointing long, thin bamboo sticks at the scene of a matsuri by

a torii gate, or bathers at the foot of Nachi Falls. But there are details that you can discover on your own, running your eyes over the mandala: searching for sticks to use as hiking aids, the curve of old bridges, piebald jizo aprons, sakura petals.

Though the mandala seems to proclaim totality, it too has its limits. It too cannot show all the mountains and sensations of the Kumano Kodo. This is not its purpose. The Nachi Senkei Miya mandala's purpose is to tantalize, encourage, invite. Where in this picture are you hiding? Behind a bush? Next to a *gashapon* machine? In the dreams of catgirls? The three-legged crow, Yatagarasu, hops off the right side of the picture, just out of view, his eyes blinking fast.

The bus, bound towards Shingu, dropped us off a few meters from Nachi Falls.

Adaptations to Purification

The pandemic changed the purification rituals, which must be performed in order to enter shrines. Outside of the holy sanctuaries of Shinto there are huts that house a water basin elevated to waist level. Worshippers use the ladle attached to the basin to splash water over their hands, thereby removing the malodour of karmic transgression. They must also drink from the ladle, though the water is not swallowed, but rather swished inside the mouth and spat onto the ground. We only performed this ritual once, at the cock fighting shine of Tokei-jinja. At all of the shrines that followed, the water basins were emptied, and the ladles removed. In deference to the enshrined divinities, though, we improvised a purification method that was in keeping with the spirit of the times. We used hand sanitizer instead of water for our bodily ablutions; likewise, we consumed and expectorated little sips from our water bottles filled with saké instead of drinking from the basins. According to our logic, we preserved the power of the kami by protecting the health of the people. The gods are only as powerful as their devotees.

On Not Seeing the Base of Nachi Falls

Tasked with writing about Nachi Falls nine months after the fact, my hands dipped into the cool water and came up with nothing.

Perhaps only Roland Barthes should be allowed to write about

a Japan he never visited.

Stories of the three grand shrines are hidden throughout our text, woven through like seed pearls. The well-dressed man and his elegant date; the train station sushi; the ancient cedars. Is pilgrimage best recorded by ekphrases of cathedrals, or by accounts of roadside meals and dilapidated outhouses? I suppose it depends on the story you want to tell. On the other hand, there are hoary pilgrimage stories written for pilgrims-in-waiting, who wish to know how others have felt, feel, will feel in the face of lasting beauty. To those who gather round your table in the inn, gnawing bones and nursing the last dregs of wine, singing your tale of stone temples, overgrown ruins, submerged Atlantises is nothing short of a gift. I am both of these future historians and ethnographers, entranced by the impossible, apparent eternity of architecture – both manmade and hewn by the gods – and by the ephemeral threads of a drunken yarn, the story that changes each time it is told.

Today, I begin with the story of the sushi chef who asked to take our picture in a homemade cardboard cutout of a camera for his budding Instagram account. Later, I tell the story of the ume soft serve; another time, I speak in hushed tones of climbing a ladder to cross over a camphor tree just shy of its 1000th year on earth. But, no matter how many starts and stops I take, hunched with a conspiratorial bent over my beer stein or sake cup or tequila shot, I will never be able to tell you what it was like to see the rushing waters of Nachi Falls crashing into sacred stones below, to taste the clear water of this shrine, to pay 300¥ for the privilege of reincarnation here.

I will be able to tell you about the foliage umbrellas of the sakura trees – their hue the barely-pink of snow touched with the sun's first rays. They swayed in the wind, echoing the gentle right-leaning flow of the waterfall seen from the grounds of the shrine. I will be able to tell you about the constant, dull thundering that resonated from these falls from the moment one emerged onto the shrine's plateau, even in the sparkling clean toilets. I can tell you, too, of a strange abandoned building decorated with shimmering tigers, lions, and dragons, colored enamel tiles like fishscales covering their bodies. But I cannot tell you about hearing the gods talk at Nachi Falls.

This is not coyness, or the secrecy of the initiate. No, this is

because, quite simply, we did not go to the waterfall. We went around it down the ancient path where centuries-old natural growth had somehow been left undisturbed. We waited for a bus near the torii gate that framed the path leading down to this thunderous telos. But we did not go to the base of the falls.

I have felt stymied in writing because I cannot identify the why – why didn't we meander down that path, see the crashing water? But, as is the case with so many things, as soon as I stopped demanding this answer from myself, it released me.

Perhaps our water-selves had been sated by the hot springs of Yunomine, which we had only left that morning. The sheer force of the waterfall did not feel like a pressing need. Seen from a distance: the kami of Nachi did not welcome us that day. Nothing sinister, I don't think; just, no invitation felt extended, perhaps. Perhaps we were tired. Perhaps we were still on the Kumano, on those mountain trails, in the struggle, not here fully yet, with soft serve and flush toilets and parking lots.

Or perhaps we were, at this point, too much attached to the kami, as these had been officially, ceremonially "moved" from the waterfall up to Nachi Taisha when it was built in the fourth century CE. The kami descended at the mouth of the waterfall, but retreated to the plateau. Musubi-no-kami, generally gendered "female," often elided with the Buddhist Senju Kannon, is the manifestation of compassion, and the primary kami here. Perhaps this compassion, weaving, bonding of this kami invited us to sit in contemplation from afar, rather than descend to the roaring pool. Unpacking a small satchel of onigiri and beer, I recounted the story of a samurai who did penance beneath its pounding rush, for trying to steal another man's wife. Kannon herself came to stop him, and later, he became a monk.

Now I see pictures of the bottom of the falls; they are beautiful; I feel regret, I suppose, briefly, for not having gone there, too, for not having checked that box; but in the end – this was not to be ours.

Many of the ukiyo-e take a distant view of Nachi Falls. For example, Fujushima Takeji's composition centers on the narrow falls emerging from the green mountain in the background. This decisive white line of falling water is framed by half a gabled shrine building at left (a Japanese version of the Lorraine-ian tree), and two stone *isidoro* (or Japanese lanterns) at right. Two figures – one

beneath an orange parasol, the other sheltered by the roof – look out at it. They are more suggestions of human presence than assertions of it, as we can only see by her dress that the figure at right is a woman in kimono. Another, by the famed Hiroshige, approaches the falls from another angle altogether – not from the Nachi Taisha, but from the opposite side, from the mountains that surround it. He shows three small buildings in the bottom left, perhaps meant to be the temple complex, but the overall effect is to emphasize the smallness of these buildings, and the impossible flooding power of the vertiginous falls that traverse the entire length of the woodcut. The falls themselves are interrupted, here and there, by jutting tree branches, before crashing in craggy peaks on a rocky outcropping below that cleaves the flow in two as it disappears off the page. A deep green and three white clouds, touched with pink, enclose the ever-gushing mountain cascade.

The other face of Musubi-no-kami is Senju Kannon, who Jack Kerouac adopted as his patron Buddhist saint. Being the Great Goddess of Mercy, She visited Kerouac during the long, lonely months of solitude that he spent as a forest fire lookout on Desolation Peak deep in the mountainous backcountry of Whatcom County, Washington, in 1958. He recounted this period in *Dharma Bums*, his sequel to *On the Road*. Kerouac venerated Kannon alongside another Beatnik Buddhist poet, Gary Snyder, whose writings I researched in preparation for making the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage.

My interest in Snyder was piqued after I encountered a passage in *Dharma Bums*, in which he instructs Kerouac on the art of climbing sacred mountains. Upon reaching the base of the mountain, Snyder states, it is essential to draw an oracular mandala in the dirt. This divinatory ritual offers the mountain, and its kami, an opportunity to offer their blessing or issue warnings. I added this technique to my own mental luggage. Snyder absorbed this divination ritual as a result of his own pilgrimage along the Kumano Kodo, which is mentioned in his essay “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking.” Following his years in Japan learning the ways of mountain worship, the poet returned to San Francisco where he promptly opened the great Human Be-In of 1967 by sounding the ceremonial conch-shell carried by practitioners of Shugendo. Snyder and Kerouac fascinated me, as their works pointed to a tradition of pilgrimage that was not so much beyond

the religions of the world, but between them. They saw the road as its own religion.

Barba Non Facit Philosophum

Laminated posters explaining the proper way to pray at a Shinto site were displayed at some of the most popular shrines. [Step 1] Approach the shrine; [step 2] toss a 5 yen coin into the box; [step 3] ring the bell, if you like. Then, [step 4] bow twice, approaching a ninety-degree angle with your bend, clap twice, and keep your hands together as you offer your prayer. The encounter closes with a final clap and bow, before one moves away from the shrine. (Some Buddhist shrines had signs of their own, usually of a more admonishing tone, reminding viewers that there was to be no clapping in the temple. Clapping is a Shinto practice, and not suitable for the Buddha).

As we made our way through/across/into the Kumano interior, this ritual went from halting memorization to embodied flow. By the time we visited the final grand shrine at Nachi Falls, I experienced the curious comfort of knowing what to do, in what order, and when. Of course, even with such specific instructions, ambiguities remain.

The prayer cannot be legislated, nor was there a fixed prayer that I knew, like the Lord's Prayer in Christian practice, to recite as I stared past my clasped hands. What is more, within the shrine there was – nothing. Or rather, it was unpopulated by any forms to which we might typically ascribe “life” (at least as Westerners, self-consciously disdainful of animism). No human figures, and even animals were relegated to the position of shrine guardians, not shrine inhabitants. Instead, at the main shrine of Nachi, I found myself looking into an elegantly-appointed room, at the center of which sat an empty chair or throne, flanked by a pair of mirrors. Entering the area through the torii gate, the overall effect was one of passing through an endless series of gateways; even the throne's design echoed the austere elegance of the torii gate, as if beyond this, too, were further passageways, on and on.

Peering inside the shrine during prayer time, my mind oscillated between two explanatory narratives. Either I had stumbled upon the home of the gods while they were out, on business, for a walk, in the other room. Alternatively, they were

there, watching me watch them. In this latter scenario, my inability to see them was not a failure, exactly. It was more that, in the moment of prayer, I should seek to sense them in other ways, abandoning my reliance on *seeing is believing* (that is, be less like Christianity's doubting Thomas, more like its mystics: Hildegard von Bingen felt and heard God as music and pattern through migraines, not text). I found that prayer was a way of making space, making its space in this room, or outside of it, and a way of articulating things that otherwise went unspoken.

The well-known phrase that "clothes don't make the man" is in fact a roundabout reworking of a similarly well-known phrase in Greek philosophy – "the beard doesn't make the philosopher," and later, medieval Western Christianity – "the habit doesn't make the monk." They all express roughly the same thing; namely, that exterior trappings do not necessarily reflect interior state. At the same time, however, we must acknowledge the power of these vestments, both for the wearer and the audience. Thus, though I am not a Shinto practitioner, by following the customs of worship at the shrine, I added to that shrine's power in some small way. And is this not the overarching power of ritual? This perspective is, as my companion pointed out to me, my own cryptoCatholicism coming through – an interest in exploring how the work of the body (proskynesis, procession, prayer) can shape or mold the psyche, rather than the inverse. The habit doesn't make the monk, and the double clap doesn't make the Shinto – but it does *do something*. Remaining open to experiencing that active "something" is what defines the pilgrim.

At Nachi Falls we noted a number of young couples using this pawasupotto as a date spot. We had seen this elsewhere, too. Raz & Kaz had even mentioned that multiple shrine visits had been a part of their courtship rituals. Even as the pandemic closed down certain regions of Japan, women in impractical heels met men in fitted denim jackets for a meander around the sacred site of Nachi Falls. Now – one might see this date-ification of the holy as somehow a fall from some pristine religiosity or holiness, a making mundane of the sublime. But is it? There they are, attending these sites with the lovely liveliness of their bodies, their desires, their hopes, buying ume ice-cream and talismans for success in exams or marriage. They are taking up the space, moving through it, and *something* is happening, both to and through them. The chair inside the shrine

might be occupied or empty, but it is there, taking up space, too.

House Noises

Our guesthouse in Shingu is very much a house, its proprietress very much our stand-in-grandmother. *When will you shower? Have you had dinner?* Her attentiveness makes for a strange re-entry into the mundane world. We eat ramen at a place she recommends, sitting on hard stools and slurping in quiet reverie. That night, we hear her TV, her slippers shuffling across the floor, each time she opens the fridge. Another American couple is staying in the adjoining room, and we hear their nighttime murmurs, as well. If there were peeping holes in the walls (even better: the eyes of a painted portrait) would the grandmother give us a turn to spy on them?

When the house finally fell silent, all its inhabitants snoozing away, I snuck downstairs for a glass of green tea. Sipping it on the couch, I spotted a surprising book: the English translation of Haruki Kageyama's *The Arts of Japan*. There, I read that the grand kami enshrined at Hongu Taisha, Ketsumiko-no-Okami, is an emanation of Susano-o. None of the literature we had consulted during our saturation period mentioned this detail. Could this be a "spectral fact" – something that is even more true by virtue of being false?

I rushed upstairs and grabbed my notebook, filling page after page with the metaphysical implications of what I had just learned. Had I failed to pay proper respect to the tutelary spirit of our pilgrimage while visiting Hongu Taisha? There is no doubt that I was previously repelled by the grand shrine's forcefield. Perhaps Susano-o remained behind when the Hongu Taisha was relocated to its present place in 1891. This archaic pawasupotto was originally termed Kumanoimasu Shrine, located on a notoriously inaccessible island at the confluence of the Kumano and Otonashi rivers, roughly forty meters away from where the grand Hongu shrine stands today.

Recording my speculations placed a mild strain on me. I began to fear that it had been a mistake to hitch this pilgrimage to Susano-o, as this elder god was now haunting me with panic attacks. Divine rumination, it seems, was both the poison and the antidote to the modernization of the pilgrimage.

In stalking Susano-o, I had aspired to discover the borderlands

beyond civilization – but all I had found was anxiety and fatigue. Perhaps this cruel joke is the highest truth: an authentic spiritual life is hardship, pain, and suffering.

By now, my companion had awakened to find me in this excited state. Tomorrow, we – or rather, our bodies – were leaving the Kumano. There was no denying that this imminent shift in our realities would be a painful one, too, as we transitioned from the quiet, joyful discipline of pilgrimage, to the disorderly strangeness of the pandemic city. We lay in silence, bodies pressed together, allowing this gnosis to pass over and through us, until we fell into a dreamless sleep.

To Osaka

Distance traveled: *185 kilometers (by train, Shingu to Osaka)*

Foods consumed: *fried eggs and toast; onigiri; mushroom-shaped chocolates; ham sandwiches; hot pot; karaage*

Drinks slurped: *Royal Milk Tea; Ito en green tea; water; Sapporo beer; red wine*

Panic attacks: *0*

Shit blasts: *0*

Sock changes: *0*

Surrenders: *0*

In the morning, we extricated ourselves from our hostess and walked to the train station. It was time – ready or not – to leave the Kii Peninsula and its mountains of kami.

Train to Osaka

It is only now, on the train to Osaka from Shingu station, that the totality of the Kumano Kodo – its parade of weird gods, heavenly shit pits, and inverted paranoias – can be viewed. Everything is organized around... a huge mobilization of city planners, tourist officers, greedy merchants, and the gods they serve. Each is focused on this project, this spiritual business. Memory of this enchantment fades, as the power of these gods gives way to other deities indigenous to the metropolis.

Osaka

In his East Asian travelogue *Jesting Pilate*, Aldous Huxley excoriates Osaka as the epicenter of trinkets, tchotchkes, and trash. Filtering his snobbishness through an orientalist lens, his appraisal of Japan's material culture was a storm of insults and dismissals. Recall that all philosophy is autobiography. I love materialism, and the fullness of objecthood. Material culture tells the story of everyday life. The secrets of the world are hidden in the minutiae of industrial

production, industry, advertising, corporate espionage, and consumerist exploitation. To borrow Victoria Nelson's felicitous expression, this is the secret life of puppets.

So I searched for something material to embody my experiences on this journey. I sought a vessel that to fill with my imaginings, and all this fruitless questing after Susano-o. Yet the Kumano Kodo consumer industry is branded with the symbols, norms, and images of Amaterasu. This book, then, must suffice.

Gashapon Shrine(s)

We are seeing rituals everywhere, now.

Thursday rush-hour and the masses are pouring through the subway gates of Shin-Osaka. Through the chaos, my attention locks onto a handsome business man in an expensive flannel suit, hunched over a Gashapon machine. Perhaps there is a word for the moment when a bystander witnesses a brief, yet fully formed episode in the vast human drama. This refined gentleman inserts his coins into the machine, twists the crank one-turn clockwise, and retrieves his prize from the slot. Opening the plastic capsule, he scrutinizes his toy – a long, furry cat tail – which he attaches to his keyring before rejoining the homeward flow of the crowd, evidently satisfied.

Shinto temples are emptying of worshippers, who have migrated to the cities, where they have created other ritual transactions with new gods. The Gashapon ceremony is a minor interlude in which the fates are invited to intervene in everyday life. It is a litany of discernment and delectation, each with its own set of stakes, rewards, and disappointments.

First, there is the selection of the machine itself from among the thousands that populate the cities. They huddle in groups of six or ten outside beauty supply stores and ramen shops, to temporary installations of several dozen in Tokyo's Akihabara Station, to permanent storefronts filled with them, usually manned by a lonely employee and enlivened by the soft whirl of a change machine taking in 1000-yen bills.

There is a special longing that haunts those of us who have spotted a Gashapon machine from afar, but never found it again. We spend days, weeks, months looking for this lost shrine. This first step is like arriving at a banquet, watching tantalizing (and

sometimes mystifying) dishes pass before you. The price, though not expensive – usually in the 200-500 yen range – is high enough to make you consider what it is you *really* want.

The second step is discernment. Each Gashapon machine administers a plastic sphere at (apparent) random, so you must weigh all potential outcomes. Will you be satisfied with any of the six offerings? Many a promising machine must be ruled out on these grounds, unless one is a true *otaku* for miniature vintage cell phones or plasticine hot pot keychains. (This particular step becomes all the more fraught once one has dipped into a machine already before – the chance of duplicates is not impossible, and the likelihood of acquiring all that the machine has to offer without multiple multiples is small, too.)

So let us say that these first two stages have been completed, and you have chosen the machine into which you will now place your 100 yen coins. Next comes the most holy step, insofar as it is here that we truly yield control to the fates – we turn the handle, and wait for the sphere to fall. There are no flippers, nor hanging claw to guide the selection process. The inability to change the outcome is a lesson in existentialism. There is nothing beyond the moment when the capsule plunks into the retrieval slot. The hiatus of unknowing thrills the heart. Only joy or disappointment awaits.

We are now, at last, in what is often the most thrilling and tense stage: the unwrapping. The fates have decided, as have we, and what sits inside that little plastic ball is ours now, really and truly ours. Here the delectation takes on a new urgency as we remove our prize, hold it in our hands, examine it from every angle. The process complete, we move forward with our talisman, on to the next Gashapon hunt.

Ultimately, the item itself is beside the point. Each prize is an artifact that memorializes the encounter point in which the human and superhuman world meet. Perhaps because of the deep pleasure of this final step, it is not uncommon to catch yourself trying to share in the pleasure of others, peeping as they unwrap their prize. It is a classic *ecchi* move, but some more experienced Gashapon players take precautions against it by quickly stowing their prize in their bag or pocket, away from the prying eyes of strangers in the metro station. Still, this prudishness is not the norm – it is more common to see a certain amount of showboating when one acquires a new treasure, a flash of a special edition *Hello Kitty x Gundam*

keychain as it goes on the keyring, a delighted cry as one gets the tengu pin, a pained groan when one receives the same plastic idol button as yesterday. There are, it should be noted, no wrong ways to enjoy the Gashapon. Like all rituals, though, some outcomes are more rewarding than others.

Null Zones

Instead of starlight, neon flickered overhead tonight. Led along by the psychogeography of the city, we drifted between the urban equivalent of pawasupotto, which were well marked on our phones. In the late 1980s, Japan underwent a powerspot boom that has only gained momentum since. Reenergized by this New Age ideology, trends in ecospirituality, like *shinrin yoku* (forest bathing), now play an integral role in the marketing of the Kumano Kodo. The abundance of pawasupotto along the Kodo is certainly of primary interest to us; yet, we are no less fascinated by their absence. These are places that inspire not ebullience, but boredom, and though boredom is often regarded as the lack of focused attention, we see it differently.

Boredom is not passive, but the active state of alienation. It is inflicted. The opposite of a pawasupotto, then, is a null zone of spiritual numbness, which should not be confused with malevolent psychogeographical sites, such as Aokigahara (popularly known as the Suicide Forest) that stands in the shadow of Mt. Fuji.

The existence of pawasupottos such as Stonehenge or Nachi Falls implies the existence of an opposing realm totally devoid of vital energies and spiritual power. These spatial voids are the product of an industrial manipulation of space, akin to malevolent feng shui. The subtle psychological conditioning of casino architecture, like the “air-conditioned nightmare” of modern malls and airports, are exemplary nullzones. Furthermore, if pawasupottos give life and healing, then should we not view these de-energized null-zones as toxic? Such was the argument of the persecuted psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who termed such toxicity “negative orgone energy.”

The pawasupotto exudes raw power, and is therefore a bastion against negative orgone energy. Existing outside the Buddhist temple system and the Association of Shinto Shrines (Jinja Honcho), the mana that infuses these magical sanctuaries resists

domestication by traditional religious authorities. Beyond the control of man-made hierarchies, pawasupottos are rarely created, but discovered by hermits, ascetics, or otherwise marginal figures. These spots inspire improvisational spiritual practices that bear little resemblance to customary human behavior. They are rogue oases of healing, good fortune, auspiciousness and depravity.

Powerspots. Osaka was saturated in these weird spaces, but that is a story for another book.

Conclusion

After Apocalypse?

What happens after the apocalypse? What becomes of the pilgrim when all the thresholds have been crossed, when the only thing to do is go home? Or not.

Pilgrimage has often been interpreted as an act of absolution, as well as devotion. The struggle gives the journey value, both personal and spiritual. In medieval Spain, for example, some criminals were sentenced to walk the Camino de Santiago. If they returned alive, their transgressions were absolved, and they were welcomed back into the community, a testament to the belief in the miraculous transformation of the pilgrim. The Kumano, on the other hand, does not seem to have ever been a judicial punishment. It was, instead, a journey of honor. The pilgrim paid homage to the shrines, which he visited on the most auspicious of dates. Nevertheless, here, too, the specter of death, of worldsending, was present.

Some pilgrims on the Kodo engaged in a practice referred to in the literature as "religious suicide." These fervent few sought to breach the separation between the Kumano-assymbol and the Pure Land of the bodhisattva Kannon, Fudarakusen, by ending their lives on the trail, knowing that this would allow them to move from one reality to the other. Apocalypse here is followed by eternal life.

Whereas our medieval forebears pursued spiritual absolution or immediate entry to paradise, pilgrims of today seek treatment for psychological pains. The psychological faculties that are weakened in the modern world are rejuvenated by the vigorous physical activity demanded by the trail. Its efficacy is supplemented by the ecstasy of the open road. The life of simplistic and rugged companionship heals deep wounds. The longer the infirmed are exposed to this "treatment," the more psychological health is regained. It is the same dynamic that has governed the ritual passage of pilgrimage since its earliest days. This unwavering consistency suggests that pilgrimage itself represents a source of restorative stability in a world increasingly more diseased.

For those who today return from the Camino or the Kumano, it is not uncommon to hear of post-pilgrimage depression. The trail becomes their "real life," the thing to which they feel they must return. They ask each other on internet forums: What now? When

can I go back? The world has ended, the survivors have found each other – now what?

The return to normal life is a terrible shock. The presence of the sacred lingers, but as an absence. Acute nausea takes hold after pilgrims leave the integrated matrices of enchantment. The anemic economics of entertainment appears as an unbearable perversity. Satisfaction can no longer be obtained in the mundane world's pleasure. So we are a community of sufferers.

Mt. Hiei and the Eternal Mandalic Return

About a month had passed since we left Nachi Falls. It was the last sunny Friday of our extended stay in Kyoto. To mark the occasion, we made our way to Mount Hiei, the sacred mountain that had once served as a kind of Vatican of Japanese Buddhism. Though it was only a four-hour hike, we faced this mountain armed with an overabundance of water and snacks. I had almost foregone hiking shoes that morning, but luckily decided to change into them before we left. It is no surprise that shoes feature so prominently in the art and lore of pilgrimage. Pilgrims are carved or painted with an extra pair of shoes slung over their backs, both in Spain and Japan. At Fushima Inari, an entire shrine was adorned with woven sandals, votive offerings from visitors and pilgrims, and at Tokyo's Asakusa shrine a giant sandal hangs from the back of the entrance gate.

As we climbed up the steep slope of Mt. Hiei, my pilgrim body lurched back into gear. The breaks for an onigiri, a bottle of water, a good view – lessons learned. We were even able to recognize the daru when they appeared again, this time near the summit where hundreds of dead and dying cedars leaned ominously over the path, creaking dangerously in the rising wind. I felt daru eyes on my back, sensed their serpentine fingers inching toward our provisions. We walked briskly, fortified by tiny, foil-wrapped blocks of cheddar cheese, and finally emerged into the new green growth of stronger, kinder flora: verdant young cedars, late-blooming sakura, and a grove of brilliant purple flowering trees.

In the many Buddhist temples dotting the top of Mt. Hiei, we finally completed our book of *goshuin*, stamps and inscriptions unique to each shrine. Some places still printed these stamps by hand, while others only passed out pre-made sheets to prevent the risk of sharing the tiny, invisible viral particles that now shape our

daily habitus. These books are mandalas, maps, records, transforming the bodily experience of pilgrimage into visual image and written text – yet another translation.

Nectar

Pilgrimage, in all its joyful struggle, reveals how everyday life is a divine farce. The ludicrous horseplay of the angels inspires fairness, goodwill, and the protective grace of the kami all along the way. Pilgrim fellowships take shape as walking monasteries in which brothers and sisters become immersed in the drama of the journey and the warmth of the divine.

The kami represent a multitudinous pantheon of superhuman heroes and heroines, a Valhalla of mutant saints who are avatars for ancient spirits migrating alongside the people who worship them. The Gods, then, are best treated as masks, though we look no further “upstream.” Instead of a fascination with the source, we will remain deep in the rich soil of the carnivalesque, the folklore of sadness, and the mythology of masks.

We met and didn’t meet thousands of kami on the Kodo, those who exist and those who do not. They are peering over your shoulder now, or maybe they have gone to lunch. They are turning the page, unrolling the toilet paper in your bathroom, encouraging you to take another, deeper sip of the vision-inducing sap.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Turner & Turner, 1978.
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- ³ Ibid, 1997: 354.
- ⁴ Asprem, *passim*.
- ⁵ Bakhtin, 61-144.
- ⁶ Turner, 33.
- ⁷ Kageyama, 129.
- ⁸ Kim, 33.
- ⁹ Guichard-Anguis, 125.
- ¹⁰ Beumer, 22.
- ¹¹ Knight, 161.
- ¹² McGuire, 339.
- ¹³ Ibid., 325.
- ¹⁴ Guichard-Anguis, 130.
- ¹⁵ Turner & Turner, 104-105.
- ¹⁶ Knight, 162.
- ¹⁷ Figal, 199.
- ¹⁸ Reider, 41.
- ¹⁹ Pendell, 11.
- ²⁰ Rhoades & McCorkle, 15-17.
- ²¹ Miura, 2-10.
- ²² Lamarre, 138.
- ²³ Yomota, 107.
- ²⁴ Legassie, 14.
- ²⁵ Kim, 33.
- ²⁶ Moerman, 1997: 7.
- ²⁷ Reader, 88.
- ²⁸ Hardacre, 289.
- ²⁹ Towle, 69.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 69.
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KUMANO KODO

Pilgrimage to Powerspots

J. Christian Greer
Michelle K. Oing

Kumano Kodo is a journey into the hallucinogenic power of pilgrimage. Part travelogue, part speculative fiction, part scholarly history, this book speaks to the universal human impulse to explore the sacred through travel. By focusing on Japan's oldest pilgrimage route, the Kumano Kodo, the authors offer their readers a boldly transgressive and abundantly humorous look at the merry art of pilgrimage. Whether uncovering historical conspiracies, recounting bawdy folklore, or collecting ghost stories, this surrealist investigation establishes a new paradigm for spiritual travel inspired by an impressive breadth of scholarly research, and the authors' many years as pilgrims across the globe. Compiled in Kyoto at the height of the pandemic in 2020, the book is a unique reflection on the unwieldy power of the sacred in times of crisis, and contains dozens of original, full-color mandalas.



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